

https://dspace.org/

Black South African short fiction in English since 1976

Trump, Martin

1986-08-18
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/9908

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm AUGUST 1986

Title: Black South African Short Fiction in English Since 1976.

by: Martin Trump

No. 195

Martin Trump.

Black South African Short Fiction in English since 1976[1]

Introduction

The students' uprising of 1976 hardly features in stories by black South African writers. In this respect, the short story is noticeably different from novels, plays and poems by black writers in which these events are often given central place. Short fiction, one should indicate, has been a predominant genre in the black community since the 1950's. What one sees happening after 1976 is not so much a new direction for this genre, but a flowering of new works in the form. That is, the major collections of black short fiction since 1976 have not offered any major break with foregoing traditions in the form, as most certainly seems the case with the novel, but have continued the exploration of themes and concerns central to earlier collections of black short stories: what is different is the emergence of new writers in the form. In this essay, I shall examine the key elements of black South African short fiction in English since 1976, touching upon connections not only with earlier collections of black short fiction but also with short fiction by white South African writers.

The central tension in black South African writing is between the violence of the society and the sense of communalism in the black communities. There are hardly any works of black fiction in which these issues and this tension does not arise. Black writers find themselves having to deal painfully, on the one hand, with the overwhelming violence in the country and, on the other, with the attempts of black people to hold together families and communities in the face of this violence. It is rare to find works which dwell exclusively on one or other of these factors. It is the tension between them which brings much of the value and dynamism to the fiction.

Because there have been no fundamental changes for the black South African people since the 1950's other than a gradual worsening of their condition (for example, the disenfranchisement of the mixed race ('coloured') people, the relocation of millions of people into rural slums, and so on), the literary works of this community over the past three decades reflect these essentially unimproved conditions. The uniformity in the oppressive conditions during this period has resulted in there being a remarkable sense of continuity in black literature. The banning of virtually all black literary works written prior to the mid-1950's in South Africa has not altered the fact that these works have an emphatic and distinctive connection with the black writing which has flourished since the later part of that decade.[2] A younger generation of writers have identified their literary inspiration in no small measure with the works of the older black writers, most of whom were forced

into exile.[3] It remains an irony of history that black literature in South Africa since the 1950's has managed to achieve a cohesion despite and because of the means taken to extinguish it.

Facing circumstances of enormous difficulty, especially since the coming to power of the Afrikaner nationalist goverment in 1948, black writers have chosen to celebrate in their works those features of their community which run counter to the vidence of the society. However, the sheer enormity of the violence has also meant that they have often had to incorporate it within their portrait of threatened communities. Apartheid has had a levelling effect in the black community where the educated and well-to-do face the same hardships as the poorer less educated members of the community. This enforced parity in the black society has contributed much to the sense of racial solidarity in this community; usual divisions such as those created by differences in education and class have to a very large degree been suppressed and minimized. This also holds true of differences promoted by the government between black, 'coloured'(mixed race), and 'Indian' people. The sense of black unity ultimately overrides these divisions.

This feature of black society has informed its literature on every possible level and is one of the major reasons for the unified literary tradition of the community. It has meant that black writers from a variety of regions and backgrounds in South Africa, with a range of different experiences and ideas about what constitutes significant literature, have harnessed their individual creative powers in an attempt to chronicle the common experiences of black people living together in oppressed conditions. It is worth comparing this situation to that of the negritude writers and to early black nationalist writers for whom shared experiences meant more than ethnic, tribal, or even political differences. Nadine Gordimer has commented on this phenomenon: 'It is comparatively easy to create a "people's art" - that is to say aesthetic expression of fundamentally-shared experiences of all, intellectuals, workers and peasants alike, in oppression: in South Africa, the pass laws are a grim cultural unifier.'[5]

However, one has to consider this notion of a unified black society with care and with certain qualifications. The black South African community is constituted in terms of different strata variously based on wealth, education, colour-difference, and ethnic origins.[6] It would be unrealistic to think of the black South African society as an undifferentiated community: one has to consider the splintered allegiances and tensions which often exist between groups such as the blacks, the 'Indians', and the 'coloureds', the wealthy and the impoverished, in this society. As we shall see, some of the writers have been acutely aware of the diversity in

their society and have used the differences which exist between various black characters as the basis for their exploration of a community which is both unified in its voice against apartheid and in which there are internal, fragmentary and potentially fragmenting tensions.

It is instructive here to consider the events in James Matthews's story 'A Case of Guilt'.[7] A wealthy black businessman is rudely awoken early one morning by the police and finds himself cast into prison with common criminals. The charge of non-payment of taxes is later revealed to be bogus and his detention is shown to be part of a police procedure setting out to humiliate successful black people. The story gives us a view of the black society in which rich and poor alike suffer. During his detention, the chief character is appalled at the way certain black prisoners abuse their fellow inmates. Hence, we also see how there are divisions and tensions in this world. However, these differences can in no way mask the common lot of these people. As one character observes in this story: '"We have no right in the country of our birth. Every move we make depend on the right piece of paper in our pocket. Life is heavy, very heavy, for us with the laws of the white man".'[8]

For all the differences which do exist between groups in the black South African society there is an overwhelming shared destiny in oppression and a resistance to it. This has tended to override in significance the divisions which do exist. Certainly, this is the kind of portrait of their community which the majority of black writers have attempted to project in their works.

Communal storytelling was an important practice in the rural black communities prior to the industrialization of Southern Africa in the later part of the nineteen century. Its significance has been intensified through succeeding decades in the black communities of South Africa, whether in the impoverished rural slums or in the townships of the cities. Fundamental changes in lifestyle, such as the move from an agrarian to an industrial and urbanized mode of existence and the disruptive features of the migrant labour system, have done little to diminish the community's attachment to forms of communal storytelling and public debate. Indeed, as Mbulelo Mzamane has pointed out, there is a clear line of continuity from the oral traditions of the pre-industrial black societies to the written works of later generations of black writers using English as their medium of communication.[9]

The rôle of the traditional storyteller or poet as the community's spokesman and as a critical voice against social excesses and abuses of power has passed

easily to the modern black writer who has found himself in a synonymous position to th of his non-literate forebears. It could be argued that the manifest abuse of the black people in the country has done much to bolster the black writer's sense of himself as the community's spokesman, critical voice, and collective conscience. Indeed, I should like to argue along these lines, as this view finds abundant suppor in the black short fiction itself.

As with the earlier group of writers who were active during the 1950's and 1960's, the leading black short-story writers of the 1970's and 1980's have, without exception, chosen English as their literary medium. The writers' widespread choice of English arises to a large degree as a gesture of protest against the State's policy of enforced tribalism; and closely related to this is the writers' awareness that English is a language which transcends not only tribal but national differences since it is an international language.[10] English, they have felt, is also a language which can link them to African writers in much of the rest of the continent. One might add that the emergence of popular tabloids geared for black readers, among which DRUM and rather later Staffrider have been prominent, with their demand for stories in English have done much to promote the trend of short-fiction writing by black people in English.[11]

The use of English by these writers, it must be emphasized, has in no way diminished their attachment to the rich oral vernacular traditions. Indeed, a further aspect of this continuity of oral forms and practices within the written works is the frequency with which the writers either refer back to the traditional values of African society or use the past as a means of comprehending the present; in some cases (and this is most evident in the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba), incidents from the African past are recalled as a means of illustrating how earlier black generations acted in resistance to the social oppression of the whites. Es'kia Mphahlele makes the following crucial observation:

> There is a definite line of continuity in African cultures which acts on individuals and groups like the string by which a kite is held to the ground; it tacks and weaves and noses up, a toy of the wind while it remains up there; and yet it responds to the continual tug the boy gives it toward the ground. Again, the stresses and tensions and segregated existence of South African urban life have the effect of evoking the traditional African sense of community so that the individual draws strength from the group...[12]

Let us consider three major short-fiction collections which have appeared since 1976 and which typify the black writers' concern with communal values. Njabulo Ndebele's collection of stories, Fools, is a celebration of life in the black

townships.[13] These stories are set entirely within the world of the townships and white people remain a distant, almost irrelevant presence for the black characters. There is a wide diversity of characters in these works drawn from virtually every class and sector of the black township population. For all the violence in the township (the student activist Zani is stabbed in the story 'Fools', for example, and a young boy is kicked about horribly by Church elders in 'Uncle'), Ndebele offers a view of this world which revels in its communalism and vibrancy of life.

The collection's best story 'Uncle', for example, ends with a scene of triumph in which people from all corners of the township gather together, in an informal way, to enjoy the music of a variety of performers. The work ends with the young narrator's delighted cry: 'Oh, Uncle, everybody is here.'[14] Interestingly, as in many works of black fiction since the students' uprising of 1976, the central characters or narrators in the majority of Ndebele's stories are young children or teenagers.[15] Ndebele is clearly addressing himself in the first place to a new generation of young black South Africans in this collection.

As in many other works of black fiction Ndebele's stories abound in instances of the humour of the township people. Here, for example, is a piece from the story, 'Uncle':

> Sometimes we [Uncle and the young narrator] would come across men who were sitting on benches close to the walls of their houses. They would be reading the Golden City Post or the Sunday Times. After greeting, Uncle would say: "So what does the white man say today?" "The usual thing," they would say. "So why keep on reading?" "To make myself angrier and angrier!" And the men and Uncle would laugh...[16]

One senses throughout Fools that the small triumphs of the characters in their everyday lives against a range of hardships stand for the confidence of the black people in their greater struggle against oppression. Again, it is in the story 'Uncle' that Ndebele establishes most explicitly a connection between the actions and sayings of his characters and the broader context of the black people's lives. Uncle's statements, in particular, have a resonance for the entire community. This is especially so in his words of advice to the young people about the endeavour needed to master a musical instrument. Here is one such instance:

> "You see, when you are improvising you are free. Completely free. But I'm telling you, you've got to learn to be free. You've got to struggle hard for that freedom. You see, if I can give you this trumpet and say to you: play something, you'll soon tire of playing anything, because your playing will have no direction. Unlearned freedom frustrates; nothing elevating ever comes of it..."[17]

It is this quiet, unobtrusive often humorous form of guidance and illumination about the black people's rôle in South African history and its celebration of communalism which are among the most distinctive features of Ndebele's volume of stories.

Developing these concerns, the underlying notion in the stories of Mtutuzeli Matshoba is the shared destiny of the black people and their common struggle against oppression. This idea informs the very way in which Matshoba tells the stories, using a narrator (a first person narrator in all but two of his eight pieces in Call Me Not a Man and Forced Landing), who finds common cause with the black people in whatever situation he is describing. Matshoba's narrators, who are very often closely identified with himself, set out to carry the reader through experiences which are shared by black South Africans. In this way, each story exemplifies a particular, unsavory aspect of apartheid.[18] For example, 'A Glimpse of Slavery' describes the system by which pass offenders and criminals are forced into becoming farm labourers (slaves in Matshoba's terms) for the duration of their sentences and the kind of horrors this involves. 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion' describes the conditions in a Bantustan, the Transkei; 'To Kill a Man's Pride' deals with the plight of the men in the Soweto hostels; and 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' treats the response of the community to political detentions and the way in which the detainees react to their confinement.

Like Es'kia Mphahlèle's novella 'Mrs. Plum' (of the 1960's), Matshoba's stories are heavily reliant on the communal oral storytelling tradition. Within many of Matshoba's stories there is a direct conversational approach in which readers are familiarly addressed either as 'friends' or 'brothers and sisters'. There are numerous examples of the black characters discussing matters with one another, often at great length. One notable instance occurs in 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion', where the narrator reports a long debate which takes place on a bus between a group of men and a woman about the rôle of women in a society where men are forced to seek work in the cities. Another feature of Matshoba's stories, and one which tends to be used somewhat ponderously, is the way he breaks the narrative flow of a story to discuss one or more features of the country's history, politics, or customs. For example, in 'A Glimpse of Slavery' there are a series of discussions (one is tempted to call these digressions) about white South Africans, black servitude, the rôle of the educated in society, the pleasures of cigarette-sharing, the wisdom of oppressed people, and so on. One of the significant aspects of these discusions is the way Matshoba's narrators

debate the issues from the point of view of the black people, using commonly voiced opinions in the black community to impart their particular sense of history. This also arises in the histrorical surveys which Matshoba offers in several of his stories: in these he stresses the communal sense of oppression. For example, in 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion', we are given a Cook's tour of black South African history in which emphasis is laid on those events which have contributed to the wholesale dispossession of the black people since the arrival of white settlers in the Cape.

Matshoba also retells episodes from the past either in verse form or in prose, as he does most strikingly in 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion'. Here we have accounts of Mantatisi, Matiwane (in verse), and a lengthy treatment of the incident in which the Xhosa girl of the nineteenth century, Nongqause, led her people in revolt against the white colonists. In the latter account, Matshoba significantly transforms this historical event, usually viewed by white historians as a crushing defeat of the black people, into a record of courage and a token of inventiveness in circumstances of enormous hardship.

Throughout his stories Matshoba celebrates the ways in which black people join together to comfort each other. In 'To Kill a Man's Pride' he describes how the men of the hostels come together in order to sing traditional songs and to dance:

> As I continued going there, I discovered that song was the only solace of those lonely people. At least two days a week they sang traditional choral music... After an evening of invigorating talk and untainted African traditional song I went away feeling as if I had found treasure in a graveyard.[19]

Similarly, on a train journey to the Transkei in 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion', the narrator records how groups of passengers join up with one another to share poetry and song:

> When the train pulled out we settled back in our compartment. I read Africa My Beginning aloud to my friend and I felt that I was going to 'sleep courage' that night. There was courage in other passengers too, for as we lay on our chosen bunks we heard singing in the corridor. Two or three sisters led a traditional lyric of joy, which became movingly voluminous as brothers picked up the tune.[20]

The mutual invlovement of the black characters with one another is fittingly described as 'courage' by Matshoba in this passage.

Finally, there is the following moment in the story 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' in which the narrator tells the purpose of his journey to a group of black

women on a train going down to the Cape: he is going to visit his brother who is a political prisoner on Robben Island (Makana's Isle). One of the women bursts out, spontaneously, illustrating the way in which the black society has a deep sense of its history and mission:

> "So he's there with boMandela le boSisulu le boMbeki? Tell him to say bayethe for us to all the great men there who have sacrificed themselves for us. Holimo! I remember the days of the Congress. I was this small then."[21]

As a further instance, communal storytelling and the urge people feel to come to one another's assistance, especially at times of crises, take a central place in Bessie Head's volume of stories, The Collector of Treasures. Indeed, she significantly calls the stories Botswana village tales suggesting their connection with an oral tradition of storytelling. All of these tales relate events which take place within the villages of Botswana where the community and its values play a key rôle in the lives of the individuals whose stories are being told. The presence of South Africa always lies behind these works and one senses that Head's vision of the Botswanan society has been largely informed by her difficult South African past. Her view of the Tswana people of Botswana also has a complex significance for black South African society not simply because of the closely entwined histories of these two countries in which Botswanans have for many decades been forced into seeking work in South Africa, but also because of fundamental similarities in black communal life of the peoples of these countries.[22]

One of the central tensions described in the collection is that between the individual and the community. The tone of the volume is set in its first piece, 'The Deep River: a Story of Ancient Tribal Migration', which begins:

> Long ago, when the land was only cattle tracks and footpaths, the people lived together like a deep river. In this deep river which was unruffled by conflict or a movement forward, the people lived without faces, except for their chief, whose face was the face of all the people; that is, if their chief's name was Monemapee, they were all the people of Monemapee.[23]

Head goes on to describe the way in which the calm of the community was disturbed by the eldest son of the chief who insisted on displaying his individuality in the face of traditional practice: his love of the deceased chief's youngest wife runs counter to a tribal taboo. Eventually, this man leaves the community with his wife and followers to form a new tribe. This kind of stress between individual needs and community demands comes to characterize the entire collection and brings to it a critical dimension which is often not apparent in works by other black South African

writers who have tended towards an idealization of the communalism in their society in an attempt to suggest its cohesion and unity.

However, within Head's collection there are many instances where the communal aid which black people provide for one another and their love of discussion are treated with respect and approval. In the piece, 'Kgotla', for instance, Head describes with humour and favour the tribal court which also serves as a forum for discussion for the villagers. We are told that although a new administrative block had taken over the running of many of the features of tribal life, it could in no way supplant the place of the Kgotla in the lives of the villagers:

> They [the new administration] had taken over, from the chief, the duty of land allocation, water rights and things like that, but they hadn't yet taken over people's affairs - the Kgotla was still the people's place. It was the las stronghold where people could make their anguish and disputes heard, where nothing new could be said about human nature - it had been all said since time immemorial and it was all of the same pattern, repeating itself from generation unto generation. There, at the Kgotla, it wasn't so important to resolve human problems as to discuss around them, to pontificate, to generalize, to display wit, wisdom, wealth of experience or depth of thought. All this made the Kgotla world a holy world that moved at its own pace and time...[24]

Indeed, in this piece, Head goes on to describe the way the Kgotla manages to resol an embroiled family dispute and brings honour to a Sindebele woman who had been ill-treated by her Tswana husband.

The communal act of storytelling features in many of the collection's pieces. In 'Heaven is not Closed', for instance, the old man Modise tells his family and frien the tale of Galethebege and her trouble-filled life. Head interrupts Modise's narrative at certain points to emphasize the fact that this is in fact an account of a tale being told to an audience: 'The old man, Modise, paused at this point in the telling of his tale but his young listeners remained breathless and silent, eager for the conclusion.'[25] At the end of his account Head records his audience's appreciative response and stresses the way in which past involvements feed into present debate:

> The old man leaned forward and stirred the dying fire with a partially burnt-out log of wood. His listeners sighed the way people do when they have heard a particularly good story. As they stared at the fire they found themselves debating the matter in their minds, as their elders had done some forty or fifty years ago...[26]

Where Head does not use an oral storyteller such as Modise in 'Heaven is not Closed' she frequently does use the device of framing the tales about village life

by an introductory passage in which she considers one or other aspect of the community's life, history, or philosophy. After these introductory reflections she then sets out to illuminate them by the tale proper. In this way, there is a strong connection with the communal storytelling tradition where the publicly told story was one which often served to illustrate one or more introductory observations about life and society.

In the piece 'Life', for example, Head's opening paragraph describes how Tswana citizens flocked back to Botswana from the South African cities shortly before the country's independence. These migrant workers and people who had settled in South Africa brought back to their country of birth a large number of urban customs and affectations which had various effects on their rural countrymen: 'Village people reacted in their own way; what they liked, and was beneficial to them - they absorbed, for instance, the faith-healing cult churches which instantly took hold like wildfire - what was harmful, they rejected.' Head brings this introductory section to a close by referring to the events which go on to form the illustrative story of this work: '...the murder of Life had this complicated undertone of rejection.'[27]

The story of how Life is murdered in the village serves in this way as an illustration of how the rural people collectively come to reject certain aspects of the urban culture which new settlers such as Life have brought with them. Yet Head is also concerned to indicate the way in which the rural community, with all its mutual aid, traditions, and generosity, fails to accomodate this young woman from the city. Head suggests how the murder of Life illustrates a failure on both sides: firstly, of the young woman to make the adjustment to village life and also of the communityto offer her any meaningful alternative to the city pleasures and values with which she has grown up. Here is a key passage in Head's account of this mutual failure:

> On the surface, the everyday round of village life was deadly dull in its even, unbroken monotony; one day slipped easily into another, drawing water, stamping corn, cooking food. But within this there were enormous tugs and pulls between people. Custom demanded that people care about each other, and all day long there was this constant traffic of people in and out of each other's lives...It was the basic strength of village life. It created people whose sympathetic and emotional responses were always fully awakened, and it rewarded them by richly filling in a void that was one big, gaping yawn. When the hysteria and cheap rowdiness were taken away, Life fell into the yawn; she had nothing inside herself to cope with this way of life that had finally caught up with her.[28]

The complexity of Head's treatment of the village lifestyle is one which characterizes her volume of stories, bringing to it a kind of strength, as I have suggested, often absent in stories by many of the other black South African writers who have felt the compulsion to describe black communities in a way which offers a fairly uncritical view of the forces binding black people to one another. The difference in their treatments of the black communities can, I think, be ascribed partly to the fact that Head and writers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Mbulelo Mzamane, James Matthews, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, and Njabulo Ndebele are actually describing two different societies. Head's Botswana is essentially a politically stable country, where the enormous pressures of South African oppression do not have as direct an influence on the lives of the black people living there as they do on black South Africans; indeed, as I have suggested, South Africa is always in the background of Head's stories, at the very least on an unconscious level, as a formative influence on her personality. There is less compulsion on Head to portray its black communities in a way which stresses or even celebrates their inherent unity than there is upon black writers describing the lives of people in South Africa, in the face of the destructive forces of apartheid.

However, the contrast which I am suggesting must not be seen as an absolute one. There are obvious areas in which the black writers of South Africa have refused to idealize or treat uncritically aspects of their society and in which they have revealed a similar kind of rigour and complexity in social description to that found in Bessie Head's stories. Indeed, as I shall soon show, positive views of the spirit of communalism in the black society are often set in contrast to the nature of the white society and the disruptive forces in the country.

A noticeable feature of the black short fiction which is directly related to communalism and the prominence of the storytelling tradition is that a significantly large number of these stories are set in communal or public places such as in trains, buses, yards, shebeens, and even prison cells where there are a number of onlookers, some of whom are drawn into the story's action. This again implies the centrality of shared black experience in stories where the writers often set the individual and his private concerns against the wider public world around him. It is interesting to consider how the Afrikaner writer John Miles set out in works such as his story-collection Liefs Nie Op Straat Nie (1970) to explore the responses of white South Africans in similar conditions of public exposure. Even in the most cursory reading of black short fiction, one is immediately made aware of the way in which black people are crowded together and how the public world intrudes, often brusquely, into the lives of individuals.

One of the crucial ways in which black writers have offered insight into their community in their works is by setting it in contrast to the white society. Most often the writers have attempted to reveal qualities of humanism in black society which are noticeably lacking in the white communities. Central to these endeavours has been the contrast which writers have seen to exist between the black society's sense of a communal ethic and the white society's concern for the individual and his needs. Certainly, this is not an entirely clearcut or satisfactory dichotomy; yet what is significant is that certain black writers have used it as a stratagem by which they can celebrate features of their communities at the expense of those in the white society.

Closely related to their awareness that features of a communal ethic have survived in their own society, the black story-writers contrast the vibrancy and humour of the townships with the grave stolidity of the white South African world. Nothwithstanding the high levels of violence in the black society, particularly in the city ghettoes and slums, this is shown to be a far more lively and, in some ways, more humane community in which to live than in the sterile preserves of the white suburbs.

Ahmed Essop's collection The Hajji and Other Stories, for example, celebrates the robust and colourful community life of what used to be a predominantly black zone in Johannesburg called Fordsburg. This area used to be a rich centre of Indian life and culture until its black residents were expelled. In a story significantly entitled 'In Two Worlds' Essop distinguishes two South African lifestyles. The black narrator records his responses to an affluent white suburb in this way:

> Henry's parents lived in Sandown. On several occasions I accompanied him to his home, but I found the atmosphere of the suburb with its avenues of trees and solitary mansions amid acres of gardens, chilling. It lacked the noise - the raucous voices of vendors, the eternal voices of children in streets and backyards - the variety of people, the spicy odours of Oriental foods, the bonhomie of communal life in Fordsburg. And it was not long before Henry too was attracted by our way of life...[29]

The 'bonhomie of communal life' which Essop and other black writers describe as being such a significant feature of their various black ghettoes is felt by them to be absent in the white suburbs of South Africa. In Mango Tshabangu's story 'Thoughts in a Train' he establishes the contrast between the white and black suburbs by recording the reactions of two black boys while walking from a white suburb into the bustling city centre:

> ...Ever since they'd discovered Houghton golf course to be offering better tips in the caddy business, Msongi and Gezani found themselves walking through

> the rich suburbs of Johannesburg. Their experience was a strange one. There was something eerie in the surroundings. They always had fear, the like of which they had never known...There was a time when they impulsively stood right in the middle of a street. They had hoped to break this fear...But the attempt only lasted a few seconds and that was too short to be of any help. They both scurried off...

However, we read of the change which occurs when the boys enter the busy city centre:

> Why, as soon as they hit town proper, and mixed with people, the fear the like of which they'd never known disappeared. No, Msongi was convinced it was not they who had fear. Fear flowed from somewhere, besmirching every part of them, leaving their souls trembling; but it was not they who were afraid.[30]

The narrator continues to analyze the differences between the white and black worlds and how these have affected the way in which their inhabitants think and behave:

> They did not have stone walls or electrified fences in Soweto. They were not scared of their gold rings being snatched for they had none. They were not worried about their sisters being peeped at for their sisters could look after themselves. Oh, those diamond toothpicks could disappear you know...Those too, they did not have. They were not afraid of bleeding, for their streets ran red already. On this day Msongi stared at the shut windows. He looked at the pale sullen faces and he knew why.[31]

Black people are portrayed here as being free from the kind of anxieties which beset their white countrymen. The neuroses which affect white characters are rarely those of black characters. If this is a simplification or indeed a sentimentalization of black people it is a conscious one which serves in much the same way as the writers' celebration of black communalism: it is being used by the writers to show their unqualified commitment to qualities of value in the black society.

If communalism and its value is a central concern in most black writing it is worth indicating that it is an issue which rarely features in the works of white writers, other than when they are considering the lives of black characters and their communities or lamenting the lack of a broadly unified South African community. Indeed, for many Afrikaner writers, there is an underlying conflict in much of their work (especially since the 1970's) with their own community and its values. Community values as defined through the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism hold little appeal for these writers. For most of the black writers, however, communal

values are an anchor and point of security in a turbulent society.

As I have already suggested, the sense of there being a difference between the black and white communities also forms part of the way many black writers use English, a language they share with white people. A large number of the black South African story-writers have adapted English to their own particular purposes and have, in a way, made of English an African language.[32] By doing this they have honoured the impulse which initially spurred them into using English: namely, the desire to break the shackles of apartheid and enforced tribalism.

A large proportion of the black writers who have one or other of the African languages (and this includes Afrikaans) as their mother tongues reveal their close affinity to these either by the way in which they use English in a slightly unorthodox manner in their short stories or by indicating how their characters would usually not be speaking English. The most marked form of influence which the writers draw from their mother tongues is in their use of a form of English prose which, like their African languages, is rich in imagery and replete with metaphors. Added to this infusion is the fact that the experiences which they are describing are almost all related to the violence of the society. As a result of this, the violence which the writers are perceiving all about them comes to form part of their prose itself.

A good instance of this is Achmat Dangor's 'Waiting for Leila' set, like Alex La Guma's earlier 'A Walk in the Night', largely within the confines of District Six. As in La Guma's work, Dangor's novella is about the fearful violence of the region. But where La Guma based his shifts within the narrative largely upon the quickly changing events which were taking place during the single night he describes, Dangor's changes of focus are more fragmentary and often relate to episodes in the distant past of either his characters or of their ancestors. 'Waiting for Leila' evokes the social unrest in language which is replete with images of violence and disarray. These are a few linked passages which appear early in the novella:

> Brrat-a-tat-brr. Jackhammers picking like crows at his guts. All around him they were breaking down his city, brick by brick, stone for stone...Must be six o' clock already. Brr! How cold it is. Only the skollies will be on the streets tonight. They are immune to the cold. That is what District Six does, hardens us. Hearts as empty as the shop windows in Hanover Street. In the shadow of Table Mountain, rats at the door of heaven...A dead rat somewhere, rotting. Thousands of dead rats here in District Six. I can hear their sorrowful souls rustle in the darkness, lamenting the death of their beloved city. City of a thousand nations, disgorge your stinking belly. No white man will ever build his home here. Our ghosts are ineradicable.[33]

There is a high concentration of metaphor and simile in these passages: jackhammers used for breaking down buildings are likened to crows picking at a person's guts; the hearts of the people left in District Six are compared to empty shop windows; the people of District Six are 'rats at the door of heaven'. This kind of density of imagery is a noticeable feature of black South African English prose where the comparisons which are made are often unexpected and disturbing. It is worth indicating how Sestiger writers in Afrikaans also found prose which was densely packed with images and metaphors an appealing practice; yet their images were drawn from different frames of reference than in the case of the black writers.

The use of imagery drawn from the violence and social deprivation of the society is a widespread feature of black writing. Matshoba, for instance, describes the sparse landscape of the Karoo in terms of a child suffering from a disease of malnutrition: 'I woke up to ragged and uninhabited country. It seemed that God had forgotten that part of the earth, for he had apparently sent no rain to it for centuries. The shrubs were widely spaced like the hair on the head of a black child suffering from malnutrition.'[34]

Many of the black writers draw upon the rough expressive dialects of the urban townships. This feature is more prominent in some stories than in others. For instance, Dangor's 'Waiting for Leila' is richly infused with the dialect of the Cape streets, whereas others of his stories such as 'The Homecoming', 'Jobman', 'The Visit', and 'In the Shadow of the Paradise' are not so heavily reliant upon this particular use of language.

This use of township patois establishes the writers' kinship with all levels of their community. Although most of the writers are professional people, they describe and in many cases celebrate the vibrancy of this commonly used township speech. From this one can further understand how this use of language is yet another aspect of the writers' concern to convey the cohesion of the black communities in the face of powerful forces set against any united black communal identification. Secondly, Achmat Dangor's distinction between what he calls a ghetto and a privileged style of writing in South Africa is especially relevant here.[35]

I do not think that there is any one of the major black writers whose works have been described who does not at some point rely upon the 'ghetto style' in his prose. Even in the case of writers such as Ahmed Essop and Bessie Head, whose prose is polished and cultivated, there are aspects of style and certainly instances of direct quotation where they display their affinity with black lower class and

dialectal usage of English. In this use of 'ghetto style' the black writers' stories are noticeably different from those of their white counterparts whose use of street patois is limited, to a very large degree, by their social exclusion from ~~from~~ the black communities; consequently, their only partial familiarity with this use of language. There are, of course, notable exceptions in the white South Afri short fiction where writers do use (to good effect) black speech patterns and dialects of the country. Certain of the Afrikaans stories of Abraham De Vries, Welma Odendaal, and M.C. Botha, for example, dexterously use the 'gammat-taal' of the black people of the Cape. There are also instances of this use of language in certain of Nadine Gordimer's stories such as 'Some Monday for Sure' and 'A City of the Dead, A City of the Living'. However, it is fair to conclude that the 'ghetto style' of writing in South Africa has, hardly surprisingly, been the special preserve of the country's black writers.

On the basis of the perceived difference between the vibrancy of the black communities and the lifelessness of the white ones, it is hardly surprising to find a richly humorous vein in much black short fiction. There is great variety in the humour of these stories. Humour is variously portrayed in terms of comical characters, ridiculous situations, and the witty use of language; but what does remain a constant feature in this humorous tradition of storytelling is the satirical quality of the humour where more often than not the racial follies of the country are held up to ridicule.

The most influential black humorous writer from the 1950's through to the early 1970's was Casey Motsisi. His most notable works in this mode were his witty pieces about the shebeens of Johannesburg. The writer who has taken up the tradition of humorous storytelling most directly from Casey Motsisi since 1976 is Mbulelo Mzamane. As with Motsisi, Mzamane's stories are set within the black townships around Johannesburg and draw a great deal of their humour from the resilience of their black characters. The first part of Mzamane's collection, Mzala, consists of five stories which describe various members of the narrator's family and the assorted adventures in which they find themselves. Closely based on his own family (as Mzamane tells us in his introduction to the collection), the leading character in these pieces is the Protean figure of Jola, the narrator's cousin. The stories describe how Jola swiftly adapts to the ways of the city after arriving in Soweto from the rural backwoods of the Transkei (Xhosaland). Jola is a representative figure: through his adaptibility and his talent for survival in the harsh conditions of the black ghetto and in the face of the oppressive laws he stands for qualities in the black people Mzamane clearly wishes to praise.

The Jola stories are Mzamane's blunt rejoinder to the host of 'Jim comes to Jo'burg' narratives (largely written by whites) which describe a black man's fall to misery and destruction as a result of his journey to the city. Like many of the black characters in a great number of black South African stories, Jola is preeminently a survivor and a person of great resourcefulness. Towards the end of the first story 'My Cousin Comes to Jo'burg' we read of his ability to switch professions according to need: 'His pass gave him a sense of space. He refused to be confined to any one job, so that in his many years in the city he's worked as a doctor, a painter, a priest, and a prophet.'[36] Mzamane indicates how Jola, during his time in the city, easily learns to outwit the system, turning it to serve his needs:

> He's been arrested and deported to the Transkei several times. Once the police managed to guard him as far as Bloemfontein. He came back to Johannesburg on a goods train...He has remained in the township, where his wits have sharpened with exposure to the vicissitudes of life. What's more, he's lived so long under the shadow of the vagrancy laws, the influx control regulations and the rest that he has come to consider such hazards as a shield and an umbrella.[37]

Mzamane chooses to emphasize this aspect of his black characters rather than describing the way in which black people are degraded and bludgeoned by the oppressive conditions in which they are forced to live. His response is one which not only reveals the resilience of the black people but also expressly celebrates their defiance of the laws which curtail freedom. This is succinctly conveyed in the narrator's comment in the story 'The Party': 'There are people, I believe, who take misfortune in their stride and can turn it to their advantage, people who'll make faces at adversity and get away with it.'[38]

Mzamane's stories reveal their author's keen sense of the comic in all aspects of life. It is worth quoting several examples to illustrate the felicity with which he describes the life of the townships. 'My Cousin and his Pick-Ups' deals with Jola's sexual escapades. The opening sequences of this story, in particular, are among the most amusing in South African fiction. The narrator comments on Jola's unceasing sexual conquests in this way: 'His opportunistic pounces on deserted wives, unmarried women and widows have left a stain on our family escutcheon.'[39] Mzamane's use of the image of the stained escutcheon is particularly witty, setting this reference to European heraldry, incongruously in relation to his modern family in Soweto. Soon after this there is the following passage, rich in comic observation and verbal humour:

> At any rate, let wagging tongues continue: my family is not one to leave a kinsman in the lurch. A relation in need is to be helped, not blamed, so we

> have harboured Mzal'uJola whenever some woman's irritated teats and overdeveloped tummy have edged him out of bed.[40]

Mzamane builds the humour of the situation around figures of speech such as leaving 'a kinsman in the lurch' and the final graphic image of Jola being edged out of bed by his pregnant companion. Soon after, the narrator describes his cousin's affair with a white woman in this way:

> I thought him the riskiest of daredevils the day he brought home a white lady - well, slightly off-white, but recognizably non-black all the same. An official comb placed in her curly hair would definitely have fallen if proof were ever needed of her racial origin.
>
> The two did not seem to have heard of the Immorality Act. Neither did any of the laws of propriety restrain their recklessness. "Convention to the winds!" they seemed to proclaim. I thought this intoxicated assertion of permissiveness some generations ahead of our time, and a few miles beyond the borders of our country's moral climate.[41]

There is an exuberance not only in Mzamane's satire of the racial taboos and bogus means of racial differentiation but also in the quality of the language: for example, there are the hyperbolic phrases 'riskiest of daredevils', 'convention to the winds', and 'intoxicated assertion of permissiveness', in this passage. The use of these somewhat hackneyed phrases and vocabulary in strange combinations and in the most surprising contexts is a recurring feature of much black short fiction where English is being adapted and remoulded by South African writers. Laughing at literary convention is part of a strategy for laughing at the society's laws. Just as Mzamane causes one to laugh at the laws in South Africa and their ineffectiveness in curbing transgression of them, so too does he ridicule the means of racial determination: 'an official comb placed in her curly hair would definitely have fallen if proof were ever needed of her racial origin.' It is worth observing that Mzamane's humorous and yet satirical response to this subject is markedly different to Mphahlele's treatment of the same instance in his story of the 1960's, 'A Point of Identity'.[42] Mphahlele shares Mzamane's scorn for this practice; yet he describes it in a far more serious and sombre fashion, indicating the misery this process of race classification brings about. Mzamane's treatment, in fact, shares the spirit of Herman Bosman's story 'Birth Certificate'.[43]

In the second part of Mzala, Mzamane has a number of stories which treat the black petty-bourgeois class of the townships with an equal measure of humour and satire. Mzamane is concerned not so much with the possibilities of their uncertain allegiance

either to the Establishment or to the black working class, but more with the hypocrisies of these characters and indeed, with how their material achievements cannot divorce them from the common hardships of their less well-to-do black compatriots. In 'A Present for my Wife' there is an account of two Soweto neighbours who are separately plagued by acquisitive wives. Mazibuko assuages his wife's greed for possessions by offering her a large range of stolen goods. The narrator comments:

> Strange thing about Meisie. She's got all the comforts you'd think a woman needs. Bedroom suite, kitchen scheme and now a fridge. She's by far the best dressed woman in our street, the first to wear an Afro wig and all that. But she won't hear of Mazibuko bringing stolen goods to her house. She knows very well that not even Mazibuko's life savings could buy her half the things she has in the house. She'll accept anything as long as you tell her you bought it. But don't make the mistake of telling her you stole it...[44]

Mzamane's stories form part of that central stream of works by black writers which set out to extol values in the black community rather than castigate this community for some of its weaknesses. There is no doubt that Mzamane's commitment at the time of writing these stories to the Black Consciousness Movement informs this vision; but what is more important is that this benign view of the black society is the dominant one in black English literature.

Richard Rive is yet another writer who treats the racist practices of the country with humour. In his story 'The Man from the Board' he describes the encounter between a black ('coloured') man and an Afrikaner state official. The white man has arrived at the flat of the black man - Isaac Jacobs - on a Saturday afternoon for the purpose of serving him with notice of his impending eviction: the grounds for Jacobs's removal are that he is deemed to be living in a 'white' area of Cape Town. The potential anger of the meeting is dissipated by the Afrikaner's bonhomie and blithe obliviousness to the fact that the purpose of his visit is deeply offensive to the black man. Rive describes the official's affability and how Jacobs comes to be fascinated by this and the way in which Bredenkamp (the official) conforms to a humorous stereotype of the Afrikaner. In the following exchange Bredenkamp has noticed Jacobs's television set and, as is his wont, begins a garrulous conversation about this subject:

> "I must say you've got a nice set, Mr. Jacobs. Sony isn't it? You prefer it?"
> "What!"
> "You prefer a Sony? I'm thinking about getting one for the boys. I like the colour but my wife is worried about the small screen. Do you find it too small?"...

"Mr. Bredenkamp, please listen to me. Could you please finish your questions and leave as soon as possible?"

"Now, now, Mr. Jacobs. I'm sorry if I said anything to upset you. I was only talking about the Sony. I'm sorry to take up your time. I also have to earn my living. I really can't understand what you people have against us."[45]

Rive's approach to the subject gains strength precisely because of the ironies which arise out of the way in which the Afrikaner misconstrues the black man. The Afrikaner obtuseness is in this way shown to be related to the folly of his entire mission.

The story 'Advance, Retreat' (earlier published in a slightly different version entitled 'Black Macbeth') offers a humorous account of the events surrounding the production of Macbeth by a 'coloured' secondary school in the Cape.[46] Rive wittily calls the characters by their stage-names and plays upon the incongruities which arise between the behaviour of the contemporary characters and their stage personalities. This is how Lady Macbeth, for example, is introduced in the story:

There was a loud bang at his door. He looked up, straining through the dull ache, to see Lady Macbeth framed in the entrance, swinging a tennis racquet in her hand. His headache cleared slightly at the sight of her. She was the very ample gym mistress who insisted on wearing very tight tights especially when she knew that he would be around. He didn't mind that. At rehearsals they had their private little game. He would slap her backside and say, "This castle hath a pleasant seat." She loved it.[47]

Rive also gives an amusing account of the political tensions which surround the production. Many of the students and staff are aggrieved at the racial aspects that arise in the project. Early in the story we are told: 'There was a spirit of rebellion especially among the more radical pupils who were strongly influenced by Macduff, who taught them history. They put up notices about a darkie Shakespeare and a coon Macbeth.'[48] Throughout this story Rive satirizes the way in which racial categories have come to possess the thinking of his characters to such an extent that paradoxically they often become the dupes of the system they are resisting.

Dissent reaches boiling point when the school learns that the principal - Macbeth - intends staging the production in front of a segregated white audience in a so-called white area. In a very amusing dénouement the chastened principal recants when it comes to taking the play out of the township and begs his cast to remain faithful to the production:

> "Forgive me when I break down like this. It is only because I feel so strongly for you, my people. To those who accuse Retreat Senior Secondary of racialism, I say, this is not a colured Macbeth, nor a white Macbeth," he stared pointedly at Macduff, "Nor a black Macbeth, but a non-racial Macbeth, a non-ethnic Macbeth. And a pox on him who says otherwise!"[49]

'Advance, Retreat' is a good example from yet another black writer who has seen and is exploiting the absurdity and humour which often lies behind the racial obsessio of South Africans. In this respect, Rive's work shares much with the satirical stories of the white South African writers, Herman Bosman and Christopher Hope.

Ahmed Essop, like Rive, has a story which describes the visit of a white official to a black household, intending to serve notice of their eviction. In Essop's story, however, Mr. Hill is only too aware of the charms of the Indian housewife. Here is Essop's wryly humorous account of the white man sprawled on the couch of the Indian household conjuring up visions of oriental delights:

> He was unperturbed by Mrs. Effendi's unwillingness to succumb. Perhaps she needed a little time to adjust to his transformation from an official into a Romeo. He had the night to himself and decided not to hurry matters. He saw a bowl of fruit on the table and helped himself. He munched an apple while gazing at a silver-framed picture of the Taj Mahal. "Beautiful! Beautiful!" he whispered as a feeling of being involved in some Eastern romantic adventure - with harems of princesses, tambourines, sherbet and all that - took hold of him (he had had two double brandies in the bar shortly before his arrival). Soon a houri, clad in silk and glittering with jewels would appear before him (he had seen such things happening in films) to offer him her dusky charms. Then he ate a peach, two bananas and some grapes. After that a delicious sense of euphoria filled him. It was a sultry night...[50]

Essop, like many of the black writers whose works I have quoted, has a fine sense of comedy of situation. In his story 'Film', for instance, he describes how a dignified group of Muslim community leaders end up being escorted into a cinema where they are left to view the film The Prophet, against whose screening they have been protesting on religious grounds for many months. In the story 'Aziz Khan', Essop describes how the religious zealot, Khan, engages in a number of campaigns for what he sees as the moral improvement of the Muslim community. One of his disputes is with the Muslim Council on the issue of whether Muslim men should wear beards. Essop reports on the fiery exchanges between the two parties with relish,

as in this extract of his version of one of the Council's pamphlets on the subject, in which there is a humorous revelry over and parody of the rhetrical flourishes of the prose:

> The beard has been the pillar of Islam from the beginning when Allah drove his beloved Adam from paradise to the present day when the world is infested with beardless Cafirs. Who can deny that Adam - the handsomest man in the annals of Creation - possessed a beard? We ask these hypocritical reformers this simple question: Did Adam have a razor and blades?...[51]

One could mention here the similar delight the white writers Peter Wilhelm and Christopher Hope take in using parody as a vehicle for satire in some of their best stories.[52]

One of the great strengths of Essop's writing is his talent for characterization. He has a keen sense for the quirks and idiosyncrasies which go so far in defining a person's character. In 'Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-Walker' he offers a lively portrait of a black man who survives all the vicissitudes of life with panache. This is the way Essop describes Hajji Musa after the opening encounter of the story in which the Hajji has proved himself to be a persuasive quack-doctor:

> In appearance Hajji Musa was a fat, pot-bellied, short, dark man, with glossy black wavy hair combed backwards with fastidious care. His face was always clean-shaven. For some reason he never shaved in the bathroom, and every morning one saw him in the yard, in vest and pyjama trousers arranging (rather precariously) his mirror and shaving equipment on the window-sill outside the kitchen and going through the ritual of cleaning his face with the precision of a surgeon. His great passion was talking and while shaving he would be conducting conversations with various people in the yard: with the hawker packing his fruit and vegetables in the cart; with the two wives of the motor mechanic Soni; with the servants coming to work.[53]

Like many of the black characters one encounters in the stories of Ndebele, Mzamane, and Matshoba, Essop's Hajji Musa is a resourceful individual who has managed a bewilderingly large number of professions during his life: 'At various times he had been a commercial traveller, insurance salesman, taxi driver, companion to dignitaries from India and Pakistan, Islamic missionary, teacher at a seminary, shopkeeper, matchmaker and hawker of ladies' underwear.'[54]

In the concluding episode of this story there is the humorous encounter between Hajji Musa and a Hindu fire-walker. The Hajji is quick to pour scorn on the Hindu man's religion and endeavours: '"There is nothing wonderful about walking on

fire...The Hindus think that they are performing miracles. Bah! Miracles!" And he exploded in laughter. "What miracles can their many gods perform, I ask you".'[55] Finally, Hajji Musa is made to honour his taunts by showing that he can walk on the burning coals. Needless to say, he is severely burnt and ends up in hospital. Nevertheless his poise and confidence are not dinted in the least. The story concludes:

> We went to visit him. We expected to find a man humiliated, broken. We found him sitting up in bed, swathed in bandages, but as ebullient and resilient as always, with a bevy of young nurses eagerly attending to him.
>
> "Boys, I must say fire-walking is not for me. Showmanship...that's for magicians and crowd-pleasers...those seeking cheap publicity."
>
> And he laughed in his usual way until the hospital corridors resounded.[56]

Among the distinctive qualities of Essop's humour is the way he has turned to the Islamic and Hindu communities with their religious practices as the subject and often butt of his comedies. In this respect he is unique among black South African writers, taking his lead not so much from black South African traditions but more from Indian literary traditions exemplified best in certain of the works of R.K. Narayan or further afield in the early fiction of V.S. Naipaul.

Humour then forms an important element in the tradition of modern black South African short fiction, and, as I have suggested, is closely related to the black writers' sense of their community being more convivial and cohesive than that of the whites: amidst conditions of hardship laughter rings out. As with certain of their fellow white writers in South Africa, the black writers have found humour an especially effective way of dealing with the adverse conditions of the country. In their case, however, comedy and laughter have double significance: not only as a gesture of defiance but also as a token of spirited survival. In the hands of victims, satire and comedy become especially powerful means with which to strike back at the forces of their oppression.

Having understood the need and basis for a fiction which in part offers strength to the black South African community by stressing aspects of its unity in face of the great hardships we can now move on to discuss those dimensions of the short fiction which most directly deal with these conditions set upon breaking apart this society; and these are set forth in the stories which describe the violence both from within and facing the black people of South Africa. In black short fiction it is often difficult to disentangle the violence which takes place within the black slums and twonships, from the violence of the social system itself: for

the black writers the violence in their neighbourhoods is intimately bound up with the wider social system which subordinates black people. Without exception, all of the black writers with whom we are dealing are concerned to offer a portrait of the violence of the society and the way it has come to affect individual characters in their stories. Bloke Modisane has written: 'I am saturated with violence... it was, and is, the expression and clarification of our society.'[57]

One of the most frequent subjects in the fiction is the racial abuse which faces all South Africans. The overbearing way in which the legal system of the country affects its people is a matter of concern in many of the stories where the writers give examples of how individuals and groups of people come to be mistreated and demeaned as a resultof it. One such instance, among many, in the black short fiction since 1976 is Ahmed Essop's piece, 'The Commandment'. It is a story of only two pages, describing the series of events which follow upon the official order that a black man leave Johannesburg and settle in a Bantustan. Moses is described sympathetically by Essop; he is an old black man who has spent many years working in Johannesburg. For the past ten years he has worked as a servant for the Rehman family in Fordsburg. In this post, 'Moses enjoyed special status and privileges not given to ordinary servants, such as being allowed to eat at the kitchen table. It was his mastery of the Gujarati language (swear words and all) that elevated him.' [58]

Essop describes Moses as a generous-hearted man who 'was generally liked and the children loved him.'[59] Into this harmonious situation, however, the authorities intervene and Moses and his employer are told that the black man must leave Johannesbur for the Transkei. Essop purposely adopts the cold, official language of the order at this point in the story:

> According to the order Moses was contravening the law in three respects: firstly, he had no right of domicile in an area inhabited by Indians, Coloureds and some Chinese; secondly, he was no longer a productive labour unit; thirdly, he had no document to prove that he had been born in Johannesburg. The order stated that he was an "alien" and that he should "go forthwith for resettlement" to his "tribal homeland".[60]

We are succinctly introduced here to some of the main policies of apartheid. There are the minutiae of racial classification and difference - Indian, Coloured, Chinese, and black. Moreover, we see how black people are considered as 'labour units' and how their residence in a particular place is governed either by the spurious notion of productivity or by the bogus criterion of their having been born or having

tribal ancestry there. Essop also introduces the insidious way in which the authorities use language, grotesquely masking the realities they are referring to by pleasant-sounding euphemisms. Moses's deportation to a rural slum is described in this official language as his 'resettlement' to his 'tribal homeland'. (Essop, significantly, places these terms in quotation marks.) This euphemistic way of describing the appalling conditions of the Bantustans is shown by Essop to have an affect on Moses. He begins to soliloquize about them, not ironically in Xhosa his supposed tribal language, but in Gujarati. Essop thereby suggests the close kinship between black people of widely diverse backgrounds whom the government would gladly keep apart from one another. Moses reflects:

> "They say I must go home. Home? Yes. Transkei. And do you know what I will find there? They tell me there is a city, with real streets and real buildings. There is also a hospital there for me..."[61]

As the certainty of his expulsion becomes imminent his soliloquies become both interminable and more voluble. Again, he reflects on the promised land to which he is going:

> "They tell me I will be happy there. There are big cities there. The air is fresh too. My chief is waiting for me. O chief I am coming, O chief..."[62]

On the day on which he is due to depart, Moses is found hanging from a roof-beam in an outside lavatory.

There are a number of ironies which Essop creates about the events of this story. The title of the piece - 'The Commandment' - has ironic reference to the black man, appropriately called Moses, as well, of course, to the deportation order. Unlike his Biblical namesake who was the bearer of God's sanctified commandments to his people and who was brought close to them in this rôle, this latter-day Moses faces expulsion from the people he knows and loves, and the promised land he is offered, is a slum. One of the more obvious ironies of the story is how Moses, who had actually worked in his earlier years as a builder in Johannesburg, later finds himself ordered to leave the city he has helped to build. Early in the story we are told how 'in a mushrooming city he had helped to build homes, skyscrapers, apartment blocks and roads'.[63]

Essop traces in the story, as a kind of counterpoint to Moses's misery, the responses of the families and people around him in Fordsburg. Most significant is the shift in their attitudes towards him as his fate becomes inescapable and his solitary anguish more evident. Towards the end of the story, with Moses's anguish at its deepest, Essop observes of the people:

> And then a queer thing happened to us. We began to hate him. Vague fears were aroused in us, as though he were exposing us to somebody or something,

> involving us in a conspiracy - he spoke our language - threatening our existence. Indefinable feelings began to trouble us. Of guilt? Of cowardice? We wanted to be rid of him as of some unclean thing. Suddenly everyone avoided him and the children were sternly told not to go near him...[64]

In the shift of the people's attitude to Moses, from affection and trust to hatred and suspicion, Essop is illustrating (with an effect not unlike that in Alex La Guma's earlier story 'Slipper Satin') how widespread and pernicious the effects of racial abuse can become in a community. By means of this account of the responses of the people around Moses, Essop brings an added element of complexity to his story. He draws the piece to an end by quoting one of the black man's plaintive and pathetic soliloquies about the Transkei: '"There are cities there! There are hospitals there! And there are no cemetaries!"'[65] With the ominous reference to cemetaries in our mind, Essop dexterously concludes the story with the quiet observation about Moses's death in the lavatory.

The hatred and fear blacks and whites feel for each other is a recurrent concern in the black short fiction. There is a notable tendency in the stories, however, to view the hatred and fear in the wider context of social oppression. The writers often try to show their black characters' hatred of white people not so much as a personal hatred for a particular person or group of people, but rather as a loathing for the system which they represent and support. A good illustration of this is given in Matshoba's story 'My Friend, the Outcast', where a black family is being expelled from their house in Soweto. The white and black officials threaten and abuse the shocked householders and Matshoba describes the response of the grandmother of the family in this way:

> Mrs. Nyembezi did not move from where she was sitting, holding her hands together and looking her persecutors in the face, no longer afraid of them but hating them - no their deed - with all her being. I say their deed because I never knew that old woman bear hatred for another human.[66]

Much South African literature deals with the violence of the society. Black and white writers alike treat various facets of this violence and there are notable areas of congruence in their works. These writers have been especially attentive in their stories to the misery meted out to the black South African communities. While this concern is less common in Afrikaans short fiction, here writers from the 1970's on have turned in particular to examine the violence of white South Africans at war and the horrors attached to the government's programme of military intervention in neighbouring countries. South African writing therefore bears eloquent and overwhelming testimony of a society deeply implicated in acts and policies of violence.

Conclusion

Njabulo Ndebele has spoken of protest literature as 'the literature of surfaces; a literature of rejection, not of construction'. He also observed that it is most commonly a literature about helpless victims and not of the struggling people.[67] This seems to me to be a most useful critical summary of certain of the key features of protest literature. However, as one considers the works of the leading black South African writers one finds little in these which accord with this account of protest literature. In this respect then I depart from most critics of black South African literature who see it as essentially one of protest.[68] Anger, there is in these works; there is no doubt of it; as, indeed, there is anger in much of the writing by white writers in English. In this regard, they are certainly works of protest. Yet there is more to black writing than simply this.

Black South African writing is as much about assertion and affirmation as it is a record of hardship. The adverse conditions have served the leading black writers as the substratum upon which they have built works of fiction, a large proportion of which celebrate features of black life in South Africa. It is significant how few stories there are which end in defeat and despair for the black characters.

The most common pattern in black short fiction is that of black characters triumphing over difficult circumstances. If the fiction was exclusively given over to a celebration of black life in South Africa then one could legitimately expect to find the characters and world portrayed in these works to be idealized. However, this is rarely the case. The reason for this is because of the exceptionally high levels of violence directed against the black community; and this violence has naturally found its way into almost all of the fiction. This violence has offered a crucial counter-balance to the tendency to idealize the lives and traditions of the black people. What one finds then in black writing is a critical awareness on the writers' part of people battling and often succeeding to maintain personal dignity, family and community life in circumstances of enormous hardship. These efforts and the resilience of the characters are shown ultimately to be of greater significance than the grim conditions in which they live. The struggles of the characters are nevertheless viewed in a number of different ways, some of which, say in certain of Ahmed Essop's stories for example, are not at all flattering to the characters.

The quality and value of black South African fiction, and this is especially the case in short fiction since 1976, is how the writers have described not simply the rage and misery of the black people, but also, in a large number of cases the

courage of their characters, indeed, their confidence. The qualities these writers have observed in many of their characters, their confidence and strength in the face of adversity, attach as well to their fiction. Black South African fiction is not the writing of a defeated subservient people, but that of a nation certain of the victories that lie ahead for them.

NOTES

1. The essential research work in this essay derives from my doctoral thesis: South African Short Fiction in English and Afrikaans since 1948 (Ph. D., University of London, 1985). I have drawn extensively upon this thesis in this piece of work. I should like to emphasize the fact that this essay flows from a study not just of one of South Africa's writing communities, but of all of its writing communities. I find it practically and ideologically unacceptable to view South African (and indeed any other national literature) in racial terms. This essay has been written with this understanding in mind: that black South African writing is one, and arguably the most important, component of a broad national literature.

2. There is no doubt, however, that the banning of black literary works of the 1950's and 1960's has had a disruptive effect in the country. A young generation of black South Africans have found themselves cut off from the ideas of older writers simply by not having access to their works; fortunately, however, copies of these works have found their way back into the townships and have been widely circulated.

3. Consider, for example, the personal tribute which Mbulelo Mzamane extends to the generation of writers somewhat older than himself in the introduction, 'I remember. of his collection of stories, Mzala: The Stories of Mbulelo Mzamane (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980). Mzamane's own story 'The Dube Train Revisited', for instance, is a direct echo of Can Themba's earlier story, 'The Dube Train'. Mzamane's story reflects the fact that violence in the black community has not changed much since the time of Themba's original work.

5. Gordimer, Nadine: 'Apprentices of Freedom' (in 'The Arts in Adversity' section of New Society, 24/31 December 1981, p. iv).

6. For an interesting account of class formation and social stratifications in the black society with a discussion of the writers' kinship with the petty-bourgeois class of the townships, see Kelwyn Sole's 'Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948 - 1960' (in Labour, Townships and Protest. Studies in the Social History of the Witwatersrand, ed. Belinda Bozzoli (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1979, pp. 142 - 183).

7. James Matthews's story 'A Case of Guilt' appears in his collection The Park and Other Stories (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983, pp. 154 - 164).

8. Ibid., p. 159.

9. Mzamane, Mbulelo: 'The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature' (in Literature and Society in South Africa, eds. Tim Couzens and Landeg White, Harlow, Longman, 1985).

10. For discussions of the reasons lying behind the black writers' choice of English as their literary medium and the historical evolution of the language debate, see Ursula Barnett's A Vision of Order - A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914 - 1980), in particular the opening chapter of this work, 'A History of Black Writing in English in South Africa' (London, Sinclair Browne, 1983 & University of Massachusetts Press, 1983, pp. 9 - 16); and, Kelwyn Sole's paper 'Class, Continuity and Change in Black South African Literature 1948 - 1960', op. cit., particularly p. 160, where Sole writes that English language 'as a possible cultural unifying force among urban blacks, with political and ideological implicatioDs is one which goes back to Plaatje and John Dube'. Finally, Es'kia Mpahalele's The African Image (1st ed., London, Faber, 1962, p. 193) in the chapter, 'The Black Man's Literary Image of Himself': 'Now because the Government is using institutions of a fragmented and almost unrecognizable Bantu culture as an instrument of oppression, we dare not look back. We have got to wrench the tools of power from the white man's hand: one of these is literacy and the sophistication that goes with it. We have got to speak the language that all can understand - English.'

11. For discussions of the influence of the tabloids and, in particular, of Drum, see Lewis Nkosi's essay 'The Fabulous Decade: The Fifties' in Home and Exile (London, Longmans Green and Co., 1965, pp. 9 - 16 and Harlow, Longman, 1983, 2nd ed., pp. 7 - 16); Es'kia Mphahlele's 'The Black Man's Literary Image of Himself' in The African Image (1st ed.), op. cit., p. 186; Mphahlele's 'Landmarks of Literary History in South Africa' and Jordan K. Ngubane's 'Forty Years of Black Writing' (in The Voice of the Black Writer in Africa, eds. E. Mphahlele and Tim Couzens, Johannesburg Senate Special Lectures, University of the Witwatersrand, 1980, pp. 7 and 15, respectively).

12. Mphahlele, Ezekiel: 'The Fabric of African Cultures' (in Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays (New York, Hill and Wang, 1972, p. 156).

13. Ndebele, Njabulo S.: Fools and Other Stories (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1983).

14. Ndebele, Njabulo S.: 'Uncle' from the collection Fools, op. cit., p. 123.

15. cf., for example, Mbulelo Mzamane's 'Jola' stories from Mzala and his novel The Children of Soweto (1982); Miriam Tlali's novel Amandla (1982); and Mothobi Mutloatse's stories Mama Ndiyalila (1982).

16. Ndebele, Njabulo S.: 'Uncle' from the collection Fools, op. cit., p. 71.

17. Ibid., p. 77.

18. See Michael Vaughan's comments on this point in his paper, 'Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the 1970's' (in Journal of Southern African Studies, Vol. 9, No. 1, October 1982, particularly, pp. 131 - 132). Vaughan writes:
'His [Matshoba's] concern [is] to produce a fiction closely in touch with popular experience...Each story has an exemplary quality: it treats the situation that is its subject matter as a model situation, from which a lesson can be derived...If we

consider the significance of this collection of st_ories, taken as a whole rather than separately, we can see that Matshoba has given a model-like prominence to a range of situations. The stories move between town and country, metropolis and homeland, romantic love and political repression. Matshoba is using his stories to evoke a map of experience.' (pp. 131 - 132).
Also, see Katharine Robertson's particularly good review of Call Me Not a Man in New Statesman (Vol. 100, no. 2580, 29th August 1980, pp. 19 - 20).

19. Matshoba, Mtutuzeli: 'To Kill A Man's Pride' from the anthology Forced Landing. Africa South: Contemporary Writings, ed. Mothobi Mutloatse (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980, p. 123).

20. Matshoba, Mtutuzeli: 'Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion' from the collection Call Me Not a Man (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1979, p. 147).

21. Matshoba, Mtutuzeli: 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' from Call Me Not a Man, op. cit., p. 108.

22. Although a substantial proportion of the Tswana people live in Botswana, there are large numbers of Tswana people who live permanently in South Africa.

23. Head, Bessie: 'The Deep River: A Story of Ancient Tribal Migration' from The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales (London, Heinemann Educational, 1977, p. 1).

24. Head, Bessie: 'Kgotla' from The Collector of Treasures, op. cit., p. 62.

25. Head, Bessie: 'Heaven is Not Closed' from The Collector of Treasures, op. cit., p. 11.

26. Ibid., p. 12.

27. Head, Bessie: 'Life' from The Collector of Treasures, op. cit., p. 37.

28. Ibid., p. 43.

29. Essop, Ahmed: 'In Two Worlds' from the collection The Hajji and Other Stories (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1978, p. 99).

30. Tshabangu, Mango: 'Thoughts in a Train' from the anthology Forced Landing, op. cit., pp. 157 - 158.

31. Ibid., p. 158.

32. cf. Ursula Barnett's observation in A Vision of Order, op. cit., p. 36: 'Writers justify their use of English also because the use of the vernacular would be tribally divisive; they have, in fact, adapted English as an African language. It is a new language with symbols and terms of its own.'

33. Dangor, Achmat: 'Waiting for Leila' being the title piece of Waiting for Leila (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1981, pp. 1 - 2).

34. Matshoba, Mtutuzeli: 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' from Call Me Not A Man, op. cit., p. 108.

35. Achmat Dangor pointed to this distinction in our conversation together in 1983. Interview with Achmat Dangor, Johannesburg, Tuesday March 8th 1983.

36. Mzamane, Mbulelo: 'My Cousin Comes to Jo'burg' from the colletion Mzala, op. cit., p. 12.

37. Ibid., pp. 12 -13.

38. Mzamane, Mbulelo: 'The Party' from Mzala, op. cit., p. 172. Concerning the cheerful defiance of the laws by the characters, cf. the case of Lyll in 'The Pioneer's Daughter'. At one point we read: 'Lyllian learnt for the first time, with great shock, that she belonged to Kwazulu. But because she knew no one there she chose to remain in Johannesburg where she still lives.' (p.124).

39. Mzamane, Mbulelo: 'My Cousin and his Pick-Ups' from Mzala, op. cit., p. 14.

40. Ibid., p. 15.

41. Ibid., p. 15.

42. 'A Point of Identity' appears in Mphahlele's collection In Corner B (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1967, pp. 62 - 79).

43. 'Birth Certificate' was written by Herman Bosman for The Forum in 1951 and later appeared in the posthumous collection of Voorkamer stories, A Bekkersdal Marathon (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1971).

44. Mzamane, Mbulelo: 'A Present for My Wife' from Mzala, op. cit., pp. 79 - 80.

45. Rive, Richard: 'The Man from the Board' from the collection Advance, Retreat (Cape Town, David Philip, 1983, p. 102).

46. 'Black Macbeth' appears in the anthology Under the Southern Cross - Short Stories from South Africa ed. David Adey (Johannesburg, Ad. Donker, 1982, pp. 285 - 297).

47. Rive, Richard: 'Advance, Retreat' from the collection of that name, op. cit., pp. 107 - 108.

48. Ibid., p. 106.

49. Ibid., p. 120.

50. Essop, Ahmed: 'The Notice' from the collection The Hajji, op. cit., pp. 110 -11

51. Essop, Ahmed: 'Aziz Khan' from the collection The Hajji, op. cit., p. 58.

52. See, in particular, Peter Wilhelm's story 'Black' from the collection LM And Other Stories (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1975, pp. 87 - 91) and Christopher Hope's 'Learning to Fly: An African Fairy Tale' from Private Parts and other Tales (Johannesburg, Bateleur Press, 1981, pp. 7 - 15).

53. Essop, Ahmed: 'Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-Walker' from the collection The Hajji, op.cit., pp. 42 - 43.

54. Ibid., p. 43.

55. Ibid., p. 46.

56. Ibid., p. 49.

57. Modisane, Bloke: Blame Me on History (London, Thames and Hudson, 1963, p. 57).

58. Essop, Ahmed: 'The Commandment' from the collection The Hajji, op.cit., p. 70.

59. Ibid., p. 70.

60. Ibid., p. 71.

61. Ibid., p. 70.

62. Ibid., p. 71.

63. Ibid., p. 70.

64. Ibid., p. 71.

65. Ibid., p. 72.

66. Matshoba, Mtutuzeli: 'My Friend, The Outcast' from Call Me Not a Man, op. cit., p. 12.

67. Ndebele, Njabulo: 'Fiction Writing in South Africa', an address given by Ndebele at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London on 29th October 1984. The text of Ndebele's speech has not been published. Also see Ndebele's Acceptance Speech on the Noma Award for his collection Fools. This speech is reproduced in Staffrider, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1985, pp. 39 - 40.

68. This is the case in the critical writings of Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, and Richard Rive.