**Contributor: Tony Voss**

**Entry: Dhlomo, H.I.E. (1903-1956)**

Adams Mission-educated, Dhlomo taught in Johannesburg, wrote for *Bantu World*, and ran the Carnegie Library in Germiston before returning to Durban as assistant editor (to his brother Rolfes) of *Ilanga Lase Natal.*

Dhlomo’s work, an individual voice in many genres, despite Romantic, Victorian and classical influences, and racially-based legal restrictions on black aspirations, can be read both as an attempt to reconcile the African past with modernity (and modernisation), and as a record of his move from progressive or gradualist to radical. From Dhlomo’s thirty years of journalism Ntongela Masilela argues that the periodical essays are Baudelairean prose poems, the African personality meeting the modern city, a Zulu *boulevardier* speaking for and to his people. The works engage with topical issues and testify to the philosophical dimensions of Dhlomo’s imagination.

The dramatic sequence from *The Girl who Killed to Save: Nongqause the Liberator* (1935) to *Dingane* (1954),embodies the vulnerable integrity of traditional society, imagining a national rather than tribal identity and chronicling the decline of tribal power while recognising African modernity and citizenship.

Of the plays in contemporary settings *The Living Dead* (pre-1941) claims respect for the ancestors. *Malaria* (1932) attacks inadequate social services for Africans. In *The Pass (Arrested and Discharged)* arbitrary arrest, detention and trial radicalise a Dhlomo-like hero. *The Workers* (1940-1) is a melodramatic imagination of revolution, brought about by the unity of workers and intellectuals.

In *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941), a brief epic recalling *The Prelude*, the poet retreats to his ‘native vale’, returning to the harsh world of modernity, identifying with both ‘the Band of bards of old’ and those who ‘rise and strike for right’ (like the African Mineworkers’ Union founded in 1941).

Romantic early poems invoke God and nature from which Dhlomo turns to dedicate his life to the struggles of the working class. Despair and doubt endanger his vocation, but ‘Patriotic and Protest Poems’ are energised by the fusion of the personal and the political. Of the short stories, ‘Farmer and Servant’(1948) recalls the Bethal convict labour scandal of 1947. ‘An Experiment in Colour’ (1935-38?), with a similarly sensational plot, argues that colour does not signify. ‘Euthanasia by Prayer’ sets materialism against theism: a just denouement testifies to Dhlomo’s lifelong interest in science.

Dhlomo’s theory and criticism expound the principle and practice of African literature and serve as a guide to his writing. Arguing for the African roots of his own plays and the validity of African experience, Dhlomo addresses language and form in African poetry, and the re-creation of the African past in modern literature. Confronting the function of the South African writer, ‘Masses and the Artist’ appeals in solidarity to the people, at a time when Dhlomo was campaigning for Albert Luthuli and the Youth League. Literature is neither propaganda nor pure art: its function is human upliftment.

This triad – activism, aesthetics, faith – defines Dhlomo’s dedication to literature as central to his modern achievement.

**References and further reading**

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***Guest***

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