**Contributor: Karen Haire**

**Entry: Plaatje, Solomon Tshekisho (1876-1932)**

Born in 1876 in the rural Free State, Sol Plaatje is descended from the Barolong boo-Modiboa, royals who had been deposed in the 1500s. The Plaatje grandfather had converted to Christianity and Sol was educated by Berlin missionaries, who were astonished at the brilliance of this child prodigy. Though he received formal schooling only up to Standard Four, through self-study he went on to become a court interpreter, and then a career journalist. He used the press to plead for political rights, and when conditions worsened for Africans under the Union in 1910, he travelled with two SANNC (South African Native National Congress) delegations to England, one just before and one just after World War I, to publicize his people’s plight. During his long absences, often with lapses in SANNC financial support, his wife, Elizabeth Lillith Plaatje, struggled to provide for their family. According to biographer and close friend, Seetsele Modiri Molema, overwork as well as financial worries caused his untimely death.

A towering intellectual by his gifts, Sol Plaatje was a politician by necessity. Founding member and first Secretary-General of the SANNC (later renamed the ANC) in 1912, he belongs to the ranks of visionary thinker-activists, like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Franz Fanon and Steve Biko, who fought the global struggle for black emancipation, civil rights, education and progress. Due to South African history and politics the contribution of this important man of letters remains relatively unknown.

Although content is of primary importance in Plaatje’s writings in English (all works of protest), in terms of modernism’s characteristic play with form, Plaatje’s oeuvre exhibits self-conscious experimentation. His Boer War Diary reporting the contribution of black Africans to a ‘white man’s’ war uses inner dialogue to parody the very real fear of death from gunfire he experienced during the Siege of Mafikeng. The book that made Plaatje famous in his lifetime, *Native Life in South Africa before and since the European War and Boer Rebellion,* is an incisive critique of the 1913 Native Land Act, which removed one million black farmers from the land. Land dispossession is also the theme of *Mhudi* (1930)*,* the first novel written in English by a black South African. During his lifetime it received a lukewarm reception, since it was the work of an African critiqued according to Eurocentric literary conventions, but *Mhudi* has since been canonized. In addition to plays that make use of multilingualism, his more obvious literary experimentation involves the inclusion of African oral art forms, proverbs, folk narratives and oral prose narratives, juxtaposed with echoes of imperial romance.

Whereas the first generation of criticism has focused almost exclusively on *Mhudi* and the influences of Shakespeare and the Bible on his writings, an emerging strand considers his oeuvre more broadly, taking into account African, Setswana and oral influences. Sol Plaatje edited the first Setswana-English newspapers run by the Batswana: *Koranta ea Bechuana* and *Tsala ea Bechuana* (which became *Tsala ea Batho*)*.* Polyglot and foremost Setswana scholar of his day, he collected and preserved over 700 Setswana proverbs, some ‘repatriated’ from London and published only in 2010. The first to translate Shakespeare into an African language, his mother-tongue, Setswana, research aimed to develop the language for use in education. The Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, founded in 1991, is active in republishing his work to make his legacy better known.

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