**Contributor: Nicholas Meihuizen**

**Entry: Serote, Mongane (1944–)**

Mongane Wally Serote was born four years prior to the assumption of power by the Nationalist Party in 1948. Always conscious of himself in relation to his society, his life and writing afford a chronicle of and commentary on the apartheid era. As one of South Africa’s most prominent poets, he is primarily known for the passionate intensity of his work, his uncompromising commitment to political liberation, the breadth of his sympathies, and the tension he maintains between the clichéd image or expression and the startlingly original one. Apart from his volumes of poetry he has also written novels, various short stories, and numerous essays dealing with the relation between culture and political liberation.

His main locus of interest was the struggle for liberation in South Africa. His principal themes, therefore, were linked to oppression and liberation, though not always within an explicitly political context. Serote brought out his first volume of poetry, *Yakhal’inkomo* (*The Cows are Crying*), in 1972. The title encapsulates Serote’s sensitivity to all life forms and their plight, but also his alertness to the appropriate emblems of adversity for his own situation. The best known poem from this work, ‘City Johannesburg’, considers the specific situation in South Africa, compressing within its compass of hate and love an extraordinary amount of social history and experience. The volume *Tsetlo* appeared in 1974. It is most adept in its continuing evocation of Alexandra, as in ‘Another Alexandra’, where vision and observation become intertwined. A year later came the publication of *No Baby Must Weep* (1975), written in a continuous free-verse style reminiscent of the traditional oral versifying of black Africa, although this was a new form for Serote. *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978) is similar in its stream-of-consciousness style and violence-inspired subject matter, but has an added urgency conveyed by its tone of desperate lament.

His novel, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981), is a penetrating exploration of the struggle period in South Africa. An active member of the ANC, his work for that organization

is reflected in the collection *On the Horizon* (1990). In *Third World Express* (1992) Serote’s search for a better world order is extended to incorporate others with shared values. In comparison, *Come and Hope with Me* (1994) is brooding and disturbed. It is as if unexpected bars to the process of liberation now present themselves, and the occasion is cause for further lament. The struggle of self with self in the personal realm, broached in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, now becomes more externalized, as conflict shifts from a unitary common enemy to power games and destructive situations where inner strengths and resources are necessary, such as the ability to ‘hope’. ‘Hope’, then, becomes a type of transformative tool, a means for achieving a general humanitarian end, rather than a specific political end. More recent works do not match the intensity of the earlier ones, and include *Freedom Lament and Song* (1997), *Gods of Our Time* (1999), and *History Is the Home Address* (2004).

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**List of works**

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