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A Literary Geography of Soweto

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Abstract: Humanist inspired literary geography offers one avenue of enquiry into the study of place. Its prime intention is to untangle the subjective, personalised construction and connotations of place meaning. African literature offers a rich source of information into the black urban experience. The presentation focuses upon the literary interpretation of Soweto, South Africa's largest black township. The Sowetan environment emerges as a landscape of placelessness in which the overwhelming emphasis by white and black writers alike is upon relating appalling conditions in an austere and hostile environment.

As part of the humanistic revival in their discipline, several geographers have attempted to penetrate beyond the abstract geometries of location to probe the symbolism and connotations of place. Accompanying the plea for a more *humane* human geography has been a concern to unravel the individual's subjective, personalised sensitivity to particular environments. Geographers have recognised that different places may be imbued with strikingly different meaning, significance and emotion. In attempting to uncover those less tangible qualities of place that are shaped by sensory perceptions, moral judgements, passion, feelings and ideas, a group of geographers has turned to the source of information offered in creative literature. Accordingly, literary geography has emerged as an infant sub-discipline which uses the subjectivity of novelist, poet, dramatist and autobiographer either to complement and extend, or to challenge and correct the empiricism of the quantitatively-oriented observer.

Although places in South Africa are referred to generously in local literature, this 'backdrop' has received scant attention by geographers. Other than a handful of exercises in literary geography (Butler-Adam 1981; Pirie 1982; Hart, Pirie 1984; Titlestad 1984; Hart, Rogerson 1985), and the odd citation to embellish an article or adorn a chapter heading, a rich and unique body of writing lies largely untapped. Especially vital and informative is a proliferating body of South African literature in which urbanism features as a prominent theme. This urbanism is primarily that of black residential areas or townships, districts which have recently been magnets of increasing attraction to social scientists.

Through the medium of creative literature, many township residents and outsiders have articulated their impressions of the places and homes they have known, lost and been forced to know. Whereas documentary and official sources reveal that black urban areas in South Africa have differed vastly in terms of their histories, reasons for establishment, and physical fabric, the literary record points to even more profound contrasts in the ways in which the areas were and are perceived; in what they symbolise(d) for onlookers and residents. With an insight that often eludes the academic researcher, creative writers have convincingly displayed the character and personality peculiar to specific townships. Through their poetry and prose are recreated the souls of places that were cherished, feared, hated, lost and saved.

The focus in this presentation is upon Soweto. Although initially formed in the 1930s, the sprawling dormitory of one and a half million people and arena of torrid racial confrontation is regarded by many as epitomising contemporary black urban living. In the rising tide of black consciousness and white shame, Soweto has become the subject of extensive literary scrutiny. Such literature evokes its status as a ghetto symbolic of dehumanisation, oppression and institutionalised violence.

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Sowetan literature was, and continues to be fashioned in an era of increasing repression. It is the product of a transformed black literature in which the poetic mode replaced the short story, novel and autobiography forms that had dominated literary expression in the 1950s. Condensed writing techniques were perceived to be more suited to convey the new urgency of the South African political sphere. Moreover, since it lends itself to communal activity (in the form of reading groups) rather than private contemplation, poetry is an extension of an oral tradition in black society. In the face of an escalating black consciousness and pursuit to reaffirm these traditional roots, poetry has become the preferred medium for creative expression.

Soweto poetry seldom pauses to celebrate urban life, and those writings which reflect upon townships do so within the context of oppression. In its contempt for Western continuities and traditions and overtly political nature, the new literature has been condemned by many white audiences as shrill hysteria. Publishers have faced irredeemable financial losses incurred by banning and the loss of readership. Nevertheless, and as the ensuing observations reveal, it offers, together with earlier writings on Soweto, valuable insight into facets of black urban experiences which empirical evidence has failed to illuminate.

The Literary Interpretation of Soweto

Those writers to have expressed their impression of Soweto in literature consistently reveal the alienation which they experienced from the township. To one authoress, the place was one in which definitions were persistently challenged. In her own words:

> ... houses (are) the outhouses of white suburbs, two-windows-one-door, multiplied in institutional rows; the hovels with tin lean-tos sheltering huge old American cars blowzy with gadgets; the fancy suburban burglar bars on mean windows of tiny cabins; the roaming children, wolverine dogs, hobbled donkeys, fat naked babies, vagabond chickens and drunks weaving, old men staring, authoritative women shouting, boys in rags, tarts in finery, the smell of offal cooking, the neat patches of mealies between shebeen yards stinking of beer and urine, the litter of twice-discarded possessions, first thrown out by the white man and then picked over by the black (Gordimer 1979: 149).

The combination of sights, sounds and smells is repellant. Whereas the authoress in question had found an intangible appeal, an indefinable vitality beneath the squalor of other black urban areas and townships (particularly Alexandra and Sophiatown), Soweto seems not to have a single redeeming attribute. Children roam rather than play or giggle; women shout rather than laugh. The inability of the white outsider to identify with the township environment is spelled out by another authoress. On a journey through Soweto, she was horrified by the squalid houses, rutted roads, litter and staring people. She felt herself "ripped out of time, hurled into that squalid and picturesque past conjured up by nineteenth century illustrators – the world of Charles Dickens' London or Hogarth – not my world at all" (Marquard 1977: 56).

White discomfort and alienation in Soweto is shockingly captured in Abrahams' 'Soweto Funeral' (1975: 14–16). The Johannesburg poet had travelled through the township "Unwittingly intent / to reach one Sunday suburb more / of mortal knowledge". Rather than focusing upon the funeral activities to which he is spectator, he is mesmerised by the surroundings where a

> ... dormitory world of low new huts
> in ranked battalions, uniform by blocks
> quilts the tilting hugeness of the veld
> House patterns A, B, C, D
> in turn insist their order to our eyes
>
> ('Soweto Funeral', Abrahams et al. 1975: 14–16)

As a white city dweller he is estranged by the "ruled", "tabulated", flat township laid out in "rigid rows" which dare not "interrupt the sky / or curtail distances". He is reduced to the status of "tourist" who strays "the nameless ravelled streets of / ... live ignorance".

For the most part, black South African literature chronicles the adverse conditions in various suburbs in Soweto and the dehumanised, anti-social violence and bloodshed they breed. Writing does little to conceal an existence of "only chaos and despair in the jumbled shattered existence of the Soweto Ghetto" (Tlali 1981: 13).

Among the Soweto 'suburbs' treated in literature is Orlando and its "ulcer" (Mphahlele 1959: 203), the adjoining squatter settlement known as Shanty Town. Orlando was "a pit of darkness, darkness charged with screams, groans, yells, cries, laughter and singing ... humanity gasping for air ... life thrown into a barbed-wire tangle" (Mphahlele 1959: 204). The only tarred roads led to authority in the form of the white superintendent. There was no waterborne sewerage or electricity. The irony of the absence of the latter in the immediate vicinity of the Orlando Power Station which lights the Golden City is transparent:

> The power station looms loud
> It stands clear against the sky
> This source of city light
> High above
> The sob sacking shanty plights ...
> The power station
> Is not for their glory,
> Ever or ever in the unswitchable night
>
> ('Orlando: A Wintertime', Lipking 1957: 99)

If the cramped three-roomed sub-economic houses of the township epitomised bleak living, conditions in the "sob sacking shanty plights" in the valley between Orlando East and Orlando West were infinitely more dismal. Shanty Town first received literary attention in Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The spontaneous squatter settlement was a survival response to the chronic housing shortage following the tremendous influx of blacks to Johannesburg in the early 1940s, itself a movement stimulated by labour oppor-

tunities in wartime industry. Paton's apparently accurate documentation of the housing crisis (Pinchuk 1963) was undoubtedly meant to raise outcry among influential white liberals. He tells of the painstaking search for accommodation and of the bribery and corruption it occasioned. The climatic outcome of the crisis was the emergence overnight of Shanty Town, a conglomeration of "tragic habitations" comprising an amazing variety of ingredients: sacking, corrugated iron, wood, hessian, grass ..." (Paton 1948: 49, 57). The improvised rickety structures, poverty and squalor of the settlement together with the astonishing resilience among its people is poignantly captured by both Paton and Mphahlele.

Housing in Pimville, another of the original sections of Soweto was equally bizarre and desperate. It was a "village of half-tanks used as houses" (Paton 1948: 61). Jabavu (1963: 206) notes with horror the "purgatorial" conditions in the township. Allegedly a temporary settlement, *ema Tankini* survived for over half a century.

The newer 'suburbs' of contemporary Soweto are portrayed with gloom and despair not dissimilar to accounts already cited. Curiously named 'White City Jabavu' features in one of Mtshali's poems:

I don't see
anything white
in this White City –
just the blackness
of a widow's garments
of mourning.

Maybe the only
whiteness is
of a waif's teeth that chatter
in the hungry mouth.

Or the
white eye-ball
of a plundered corpse,
lying in the gutter.

Around me
is the gloomy
street corner
where dark figures
dart to deal
a deadly blow
on passerby.

I hear
women scream
in sorrow and despair
drying the gay rivers
of carousers

I stop
to ponder
but what is white
in White City Jabavu?

('White City Jabavu', Mtshali 1971: 70)

Other than the poet's indignation at the irony of the suburb's inappropriate name notice the abundant use of images of death, darkness and violence. The portrait of White City Jabavu is both representative of the larger Soweto and an overriding theme in Soweto literature. Images of dust, dirt and rubbish point to a choking environment in which aspirations and ambitions are buried. Extracts from poems preoccupied with the stifling township include the following contribution by one who claims

I have seen rubbish bins
but Soweto is the best one
she contains the garbage
of all ages

('Vuka', Manaka 1980: 42)

A second poet implores us to:

Look deep into the ghetto
And see modernised graves
Where only the living dead exist
Manacled by chains
So as not to resist

Look the ghetto over
You will see smog hover
And dust choking
The lifeless-living-dead

('The Ghetto', Maponya 1980: 9)

Several lines of yet another poem point further to this experiential landscape of placelessness:

these streets are bloody dirty
these streets go nowhere
they've woven the children of this town into their dust

they've woven to nowhere
these streets are dirty and dusty
they've made the children of this town gasp in their dongas

('No Baby Must Weep', Serote 1975: 46)

In keeping with its origins, Soweto remains little more than a labour entrepôt, a place which has never been allowed to evolve into a city with an infrastructure and facilities befitting the size of its population. One glaring symbol of Soweto's rôle as a labour camp are the hostels which house mainly those men separated from their families by the influx control laws. These 'single' quarters are among the most pernicious facets of Sowetan living to receive literary attention. Matshoba's (1981) provocatively titled 'To Kill a Man's Pride' probes deeply the evil of hostel life. The opening lines to his story read:

Every man is born with a certain amount of pride in his humanity. But I have come to believe that pride is only a mortal thing, and that there are many ways to destroy it. One sure way is to take a man and place him in a Soweto hostel (Matshoba 1981: 104).

Matshoba lashes out at Mzimhlope hostel, home of some twenty thousand migrant labourers, as a "shameful place", Soweto's own "Auschwitz", a rotting, neglected unhygienic pigsty of deprived men living in the "lowest state of dereliction". Forty-eight men occupied each "fifty pace long" dormitory":

There is absolutely no privacy there. You sleep in the corner of the closet, or a door-like lid of a brick kist in which you are supposed to keep your possessions, a metre from the man next to you and the man below you (Matshoba, 1981: 117).

In this debasing, inhumane environment in particular and in Soweto in general, murder and violence is rife. Nowhere is the literary treatment of violence in South African black townships as preoccupying as it is in the Soweto example. Two leading black South African poets, namely, Sepamla and Mtshali have written extensively of brutality in Soweto. One critic has noted the astonishing number of words in Sepamla's poetry that embrace the concept of fear. They include, fleeing, terror, cowed, scared, alarm, frantic, cowardly, hounded, panic, scurry, scuttle and tremble (February, 1982). Sepamla's collection, ironically titled *The Soweto I Love* (1977), reflects the terror of one South African landscape in which life is a nightmare.

The world and the existence presented in Mtshali's disturbingly vivid poetry about black urban life is equally distorted and tilted. Many of his subjects are the victims of violently destructive and anti-social behaviour (Ndebele 1982). For instance, a newly born baby is abandoned on a rubbish heap and attacked by scavenging dogs. The horrific event reveals the almost matter-of-fact reality of township poverty, infant mortality and family disintegration. In yet another poem, a man having paused to watch a senseless murder on his way to church, saunters home with „heart as light as an angel's kiss" ('Just a passerby', Mtshali 1971: 74). Life is so precarious that even the dignity of dying is belittled. It is reduced to

the mistress
with whom we
brazenly carry on
an illicit love affair
that ends only
in the grave

('Death – the tart', Mtshali 1971: 80)

In Soweto

Nightfall comes like
a dreaded disease
seeping through the pores
of a healthy body
and ravaging it beyond repair
A murderer's hand
lurking in the shadows
clasping the dagger
strikes down the helpless victim ...
Man has ceased to be man
Man has become beast
Man has become prey ...

('Nightfall in Soweto', Mtshali 1971: 58–59)

Both striker and victim are dehumanised in the brutal township environment. Life is so warped that natural processes are likened to ghastly sickness. The casualty ward of Soweto's largest hospital is likened to a battlefield:

... victims of war
waged in the dark alley
flocked in cars, taxis, ambulances and trucks ...
Doctors darting
from place to place
with harried nurses at their side
So! it's Friday night!
Everybody's enjoying
in Soweto

('Intake night – Baragwanath Hospital', Mtshali 1971: 56)

The world of Soweto is one where violence is an integral part of existence reducible even to entertainment. This obsession with violence is not confined to the works of established writers. Less well-known poets are equally resolute in their view of Soweto as harbour "of crime and forced merriment / Enslaved by ailments and darkness" ('Soweto Is ...', Rabothatha 1978: 33). Letlhage's short, chilling poem reads

I hear
Faint little voices
The folk-songs are subsiding
The black slumbering giant
Is going to sleep
And deathly fear grips my heart

('Soweto Village', Letlhage 1980: 11)

Soweto is presented across time and in a wide range of works, as a brutal environment; one which negates normal living.

Indicative of the unfailing perception of Soweto as an alienating environment, even the most elite area of the township, Selection Park, has "something unsettled about it":

The houses, the lawns, bricks and mortar, the neighbours – everything is new or so it feels. The streets are tarred and there are pavements of sorts in this part of Soweto ... No. 5444 is where I live" (Manganyi, writing of Mphahlele 1983: 10).

The latter sentence is pregnant with implication. Mphahlele's house is defined not by its appearance or street name, for example, but by number. It is furthermore not described as his *home* but where 'he lives'. The impression created is one of placelessness. Soweto's alienating effects seem to extend across individual suburbs, across social strata, across time and across race. This notwithstanding, there are scattered literary references to some kind of security and belonging that the sprawling ghetto has failed to muzzle.

On her return visit to South Africa, Jabavu (1963) is struck by the life and harmony in the spectacle of men, women and children laughing, living and playing oblivious of and in contrast to their squalid surroundings. Matshoba (1979: 92–106) refers to his "dear old Mzimhlope township": "to me it is home, and no place is better than home". As Soweto sprawls "to the horizons like a reposing giant" he "could not help feeling something like awe, a clutch at the heart of my being". Having been away for some weeks he had missed "the quicksand of location life" in which there is "never a dull moment". The ambivalence in Matshoba's "beloved kennel", in his "unbearably vibrant ... labour camp" cannot be overlooked. His juxtaposition of endearment and laudatory adjectives with demeaning metaphors is deeply ironic. So too is Sepamla's statement:

I love you Soweto
I've done so long before
the summer swallow deserted you
I have bemoaned the smell of death
hanging on your neck like an albatross
I have hated the stench of your blood
blood made to flow in every street
but I have taken courage
in the thought that
those who mother your back
will carry on with the job
of building anew
a body of being
from the ashes in the ground

('Soweto', Sepamla 1977: 22–24)

The poem stands out in a volume in which the mood is one of utter pessimism. Sepamla's love is for Soweto's people and the undaunted perseverence they symbolise. His words hold intonations of courage, strength, challenge and unbreakable determination in the will to survive and transcend suffering.

Closing Comments

As much as any place, Soweto is complex, and the essence of life there resists easy classification and description. To the extent possible Sepamla (1976) has perhaps been better able than most to illuminate the diversity of the township where definitions fail; where authority and hope are ever present; where images are distorted and analogies warped:

The blues is the shadow of cop
dancing the Immorality Act jitterbug
the blues is the Group Areas Act and all its jive
the blues is the Bantu Education Act and its improvisations
the blues is those many words said to repair
yesterdays filled again and again by today's promises ...

('The blues is you in me', Sepamla 1976: 7)

The austerity of Soweto's artificial environment and the predatory lifestyle and privation it breeds are dramatically spelled out in literature. The subjective world observed by poets and novelists almost contradicts the impression conveyed by conventional information sources. Whereas official documentations emphasise the neat orderliness of Soweto, literary sources make much more of the emotional alienation it engenders. In tandem with the contrived establishment of the township, the experiential landscape of Soweto which emerges in literature is one of placelessness. The consistency with which writers of literature evoke the wretchedness of life in Soweto together with the absence of scholarly penetration into the subjective realm of the township adds weight to the case for a literary geography there.

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