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Art As Craft and Politics: The Literature of Mongane Wally Serote

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
Abbreviations.....	4
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: A Biographical Summary and Background	20
Chapter 3: Pre-Sharpeville Political and Literary Contexts	32
Chapter 4: The Early Poems: <u>Yakhal'inkomo</u> and <u>Tsetlo</u>	37
Chapter 5: The First Epic: <u>No Baby Must Weep</u>	66
Chapter 6: <u>To Every Birth Its Blood</u>	108
Chapter 7: Poetry of the Years in Exile: <u>Behold Mama, Flowers, The Night Keeps Winking</u> and <u>A Tough Tale</u>	142
Chapter 8: The Later Poems: <u>Third World Express, Come and Hope With Me</u> and <u>Freedom</u> <u>Lament and Song</u>	174
Works Cited	193
Index	197

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In this new age they will be acclaimed
Those who wrote, sitting on the bare ground,
Those who sat amongst the poor
Those who sat with people who struggled
Those who told of the sufferings of the poor
Those who told of the deeds of people who struggled,
Told artistically in the noble language
Formerly reserved
For glorifying Kings
(Brecht, 1982: 67)

Your cattle are gone,
My countrymen!
Go rescue them! Go rescue them!
Leave the breechloader alone
And turn to the pen.
Take paper and ink,
For that is your shield.

Your rights are going!
So pick up your pen,
Load it, load it with ink.
Sit in your chair-
Repair not to Hoho,
But fire with your pen.
(I. W. W. Citashe)

Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
<u>ATT</u>	<u>A Tough Tale</u> (1987)
BC	Black Consciousness
<u>BMF</u>	<u>Behold Mama, Flowers</u> (1978)
<u>CHWM</u>	<u>Come and Hope With Me</u> (1994)
<u>FLS</u>	<u>Freedom, Lament and Song</u> (1997)
<u>NBMW</u>	<u>No Baby Must Weep</u> (1975)
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
SASO	South African Students Organisation
<u>TNKW</u>	<u>The Night Keeps Winking</u> (1982)
<u>TWE</u>	<u>Third World Express</u> (1992)
<u>TEBIB</u>	<u>To Every Birth Its Blood</u> (1981)
UDF	United Democratic Front
U. S.	United States of America

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In those areas of the world which were colonised the role of culture in the liberation struggle has proved to be very crucial. Generally, cultural resistance rates alongside the political, economic, social and the armed aspects of the revolution, being in no sense inferior to the other parts of that whole process. In his paper, "Cultural Struggle and the Narratives of South African Freedom", Graham Pechey makes an even stronger argument for the cultural struggle when he argues:

The cultural struggle of the majority and its allies is the active self-awareness of all of these struggles, the means of their being experienced as a unity - lived in their contemporary interconnection, linked in a common history. It does not need to defer to some reified instance of 'politics'; it is not the 'subjective' fighting-out of something other than and more real or 'objective' than itself; it is, rather, the very condition of the existence of the political in the first place. (1994: 25)

Revolutionary consciousness produces the realisation of the expansiveness of the area on which oppression manifests itself thus initiating the critical broadening and consolidation of the theoretical and practical dimensions of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. The psychological characteristic of the cultural struggle makes it a significant site for critical evaluation of culture as a largely ideological and intellectual practice and also opens-up other social narratives, institutions, beliefs, etc., which are its raw material, to critical scrutiny.

In her book, Resistance Literature (1987), Barbara Harlow identifies both the moment of origin and the ambivalent character of the post-colonial cultural struggle which she captures with a quote from Franz Fanon, "Colonialism is not satisfied with merely holding a people in

its grip and emptying the native's head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (1987: 18). The late Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko, echoes this sentiment in I Write What I like (1978), "Whenever colonisation sets in with its dominant culture it devours the native culture and leaves behind a bastardised culture that can only thrive at the rate and pace allowed it by the dominant culture" (1978: 46). Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer and critic captures the intricate link between politics and culture in the imperialist project in Decolonising the Mind (1981), where he writes:

Berlin of 1884 was affected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle. (1981: 9)

In the same chapter, Ngugi presents an empowering insight into the character and execution of colonialism and formulates the basis for the importance of resistance culture for its antithesis. He argues:

Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser. (Ibid, 16)

If oppression cannot be complete without the psychological enslavement of the victims, then the cultural sphere becomes the site of the most crucial front in the liberation struggle and a critical field of study in modern societies. This is especially the case in African and other Third World countries where the struggle against colonialism and imperialism, "is waged at

the same time as a struggle for historical and cultural record. ... [Where] the struggle over historical record is seen from all sides as no less than the armed struggle” (Harlow, 1987:7).

Edward W. Said conceptualises this cultural domain of the liberation struggle in Culture and Imperialism (1994) thus:

The slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory which is at the heart of decolonisation is preceded - as empire had been - by the charting of cultural space. After the period of ‘primary resistance’, literally fighting against outside intrusion, there comes the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance. (1994: 252)

Culture in colonial societies, Graham Pechey concurs, “fully comes into its own as a terrain of struggle after what historians call ‘primary’ (that is, military) resistance to conquest has been forsaken” (1994: 25).

Pechey argues that in South Africa, this happened in 1906 with the Bambatha rebellion in Natal. Focussing on writing, he outlines the features of cultural struggle and highlights the challenges it poses:

Writing which has taken the place of fighting will bear the marks of this substitution, will always be deeply and inwardly informed by the counter violence of the past that it continues by other means. At the same time it is not just a question of neutral ‘means’: to fire with one’s pen rather than with a rifle - as the Xhosa poet Citashe had put it in the 1890s- is not a matter of simply exchanging one weapon for another; it is to propose to yourself radically different, irreducibly modern ends. The early struggle aimed to restore or defend pre-modern relations and institutions; the cultural struggle is a modernist move in so far as it signals the irreversible entry of the majority into modernity. The organic intellectuals of the majority then join the modernising dynamic of capital as internal critics who claim a say in determining its paths. (Ibid: 26)

In Serote’s case as well as that of his colleagues the “counter violence” or resistance politics which “inwardly inform” the writing as a document of cultural struggle is very dominant and too direct. Like other South African organic intellectuals Serote faced the

challenges posed by the postcolonial situation on his group. These are the challenges of asserting and attesting to the subjectivity of the oppressed, of staking their claim to authority of their own narratives, of articulating their rejection of being misrepresented objects of others' gaze(s), their subordination and their exploitation.

In an attempt to demonstrate the importance of counter-hegemonic 'expropriation' of the cultural production from the control of the oppressors by the oppressed, Harlow presents the example of Hugo Blanco, a Peruvian activist who was a prominent organiser among the peasants. With a quote from Blanco's Land or Death: The Peasant Struggle in Peru (1972) she demonstrates the power of the written word in the hands of the colonial hegemony and illustrates the revolutionary effect of this power when turned against that hegemony by the liberation movement:

It is important to understand that for centuries the oppressors of peasants made them regard paper as a god. Paper became a fetish: Arrest orders are paper. By means of a paper they crush the Indian in courts. The peasant sees paper in the offices of the governor, the parish priest, the judge, the notary - wherever there is power; the landowner, too, keeps accounts on paper. All the reckonings you have made, all your logical arguments, they refute by showing you a paper; the paper supersedes logic, it defeats it. There is a famous saying: *Qelqan riman* (What is written is what is heard). We fight this fetish to death. And one of the ways to fight it is precisely to show the peasant that, just as the enemy has *his* papers, so we have *our papers*. To the paper that contradicts the reason and logic of the peasant, we counterpose the paper that bears that reason and logic. This by itself is already a marvel for the illiterate peasant. The existence of papers that speak in his behalf, that speak his truth, is already the beginning of his triumph. He views them with respect and affection. (1987: 12)

In this powerful observation of the potential of the silent struggle waged on the cultural and ideological fronts, Blanco goes on to report how the peasants use the leaflets as wall papers to cover the walls of their homes thus making them available to literate visitors and their school going children (Ibid, 13).

In a penetrating probe into the relationship of artists with the political organisations

which lead the liberation struggle, Popular and Political Culture for South Africa: Towards a Revolutionary Artistic Practice in South Africa (1987), Karen Press distinguishes the fundamental feature of the BC's "cultural worker" tradition, of which Serote was a prominent member, as the insistence on the link between individual artistic practice and political, organisational work which laid the foundations for much of the eighties cultural activity. In contrast to the initial literary activities of the mission educated blacks which articulated individual viewpoints depending "as much on the idiosyncrasies of their own education and aspirations as on the experience of oppression they shared with the uneducated masses" contemporary artists were "linking their commitment with increasing frequency to the political analyses of the mass-based political organisations inside the country" (Press, 1987: 20).

According to Press, the 1982 Culture and Resistance Festival held in Botswana was significant "in that it was the first ever gathering of South African artists with the explicit aim of acknowledging the constant battle among cultural workers to find a place for themselves in society which is not merely that of light entertainers but one of making an important contribution to the development of society" (Ibid, 21). A single contribution to the symposium by Keorapetse Kgotsisile inaugurated the reign of "relevance" under the auspices of the "People's Culture Campaign". Kgotsisile's argument that "literature is a site of struggle; it must serve the interests of the people against a culture which insists that they should be robbed", according to Press, "introduced a language which has since come to dominate the discourse of cultural commitment amongst progressive artists - a language in which art is seen as a functional element of mass struggle, not as random offerings of individuals operating outside the sphere of social compulsion" (Ibid, 22).

Press suggests four defining characteristics of "people's culture" in her book:

[First] is its concern to alter the conventional ways in which art is made

available (or, more accurately, unavailable) to audiences. ... [Second] is the aim of building a national culture that will unite the oppressed community. ... [Third] is its emphasis on a type of content that relates very directly to the daily experiences of the oppressed community. ... [This relates] as much to the aesthetic forms used by the artist as to the subject matter he or she chooses to deal with; the implication is that the aesthetics of “people’s culture” should be one of concrete realism, using always words and images that are familiar to the oppressed, and constructing a version of their experience that follows closely the contours of factual documentary. The *fourth* ... is its insistence that the task of progressive artists should be defined in terms of the political analysis and strategies of the ANC and UDF. (Ibid, 27)

The “people’s culture” campaign further fragmented the already polarised South African intellectual and ideological life of the era. The “relevance debate” intensified during the 1980s, a decade of the fiercest uprisings and the harshest repression in the history of South Africa.

Generally, the line of debates in the literary field, like society itself, could be roughly divided into two antagonistic camps. From one side, anything less than explicit political engagement on the side of the oppressed constituted an anti-revolutionary reaction or “art for art’s sake”. It is this reign of “relevance” which prompted the public lament by a prominent poet, Farouk Asvat, whose complain, “We are going through an unfortunate phase where unless you mouth specific slogans people consider you part of the opposition” (Weekly Mail, 14 - 20 July 1987: 19) was not spurious. Press captures the critical shortcomings of having a cultural strategy controlled by a political organisation such as the “people’s culture” campaign:

the UDF’s sanctioning of “people’s culture” has, as its corollary, a rejection of anything that does not a) accept the definitions of cultural work contained within the framework of “people’s culture”, and b) ally itself with the politics of the UDF itself. And this rejection has real effects on the conditions of work of those artists who do not situate themselves within the framework of “people’s culture”. (1987:39)

The counter perspective was inaugurated by Lewis Nkosi’s stringent observation back in 1967. In his famous statement, Nkosi charged that, “black fiction was filled with journalistic

fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature and ... seldom were social facts transmitted into artistically pervasive works of fiction” (quoted in David Atwell, 1993: 11 - 12). The “relevance” debate inspired the debate at the University of Cape Town’s Centre for African Studies in 1989 between Douglas Reid Skinner of Upstream magazine and Kelwyn Sole a critic, poet and lecturer at the university. It was also in the spirit of this debate that Njabulo Ndebele made his invaluable intervention with a group of essays published by the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) under the title, Rediscovery of the Ordinary (1989).

The subsequent appearance of “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (1990) a paper by a high ranking official of the African National Congress (ANC) Albie Sachs fuelled the debate and generated extraordinary responses from various cultural analysts. These were later collected by Natal University Press under the title Exchanges: South African Writing in Transition (1991) with Duncan Brown and Bruno van Dyke as editors. In short, Sachs restated Nkosi’s point that the quality of South African art had deteriorated because of its obsession with politics and to remedy the situation, artists should be banned from using ‘culture as a weapon of the struggle’. However, Kelwyn Sole’s response the interview with Brown and van Dyke voices an important caution:

there is a tendency implicit in the manner in which Sachs’s paper is being discussed ... which I find fascinating. This tendency seems to me to assume that ‘culture as a weapon of the struggle’ belongs to the era of the political struggle against apartheid, while an ‘art’ blissfully free of politics belongs to a subsequent era of liberation. The formulation of such an absolute divide is, I believe, mistaken. (1991: 80)

Nonetheless, Benita Parry also adds her objection to the hegemony of realism, functionalism and explicit political engagement in the literary aspect of the South African cultural struggle. She cites the 1986 *Towards a People’s Culture* festival and the *Culture for*

Another South Africa conference held in Amsterdam in 1987 both of which adopted resolutions that entrenched this privileged status of the “committed” literature under the banner of “people’s culture” as culminations of this tendency. (Serote was instrumental in the organisation of both events.) In “On the Critique of ‘Resistance’ Literature” Parry asserts that:

inscriptions of the political may not be immediately visible in subject and representation, and oppositional discourses quickening liberation energies can reside in spaces where there is no obvious correspondence between image and social message, and in articulations which do not register a literal relationship of word to social referent. (1994: 13)

Even though she acknowledges the factor of accessibility to illiterate and semi-literate audiences as an extenuating factor for the hegemony of social realism she nevertheless warns that “it continues to carry the immanent danger of proscribing or denigrating the eccentric and the experimental” (Ibid: 15). To further illuminate and stress her point, she points out that:

The fantastic and the fabulous, the grotesque and the disorderly, the parodic reiteration or inversion of dominant codes, the deformation of master tropes, the estrangement of authorised syntax: these are amongst the many textual procedures that can act as oppositional and subversive, and without directly illuminating the struggle or ostensibly articulating dissent and protest. (Ibid)

This heterogeneity of counter-hegemonic spaces is eloquently captured in Njabulo Ndebele’s theatre analogy in his paper, “Liberation and the Crisis of Culture”:

The problem is that the South African stage ... is full of actors with many competing scripts. Hitherto there had been, as it were, only one legitimate actor with his one legitimate script: all other possible actors had been forcibly prevented from entering the stage. But after years of persistent pressure, the dominant actor has finally yielded some space on the stage, and we are witnessing a frantic entrance of new actors, all carrying their own scripts. We wait for the scripts to be opened, for some of them have been written many years back; and we wonder what possible exercises in re-writing and revising have been carried out. (1994: 1)

Among this range of oppositional literary practices however, the expressively committed largely owed its dominance to its genuine attempt to engage the 'illiterate and semi-literate' masses in a simple and direct language which was more suitable to both the functional and political objectives of the writer and the literacy level of the masses.

Serote and his fellow cultural workers belong to that category of artists whose works are consciously connected to a strategy of a particular political organisation. For most of them, the realisation of the fundamental objective of the 'People's Culture' programme - to produce a culture that will express the aspirations of the people in the struggle - was a principle for whose pursuit and attainment they were genuinely committed.

A brief discussion of the notion of an intellectual will illuminate some important aspects about Mongane Serote the person and the writer. In his 1993 Reith lectures Representations of the Intellectual (1994) Said offers critical insights for understanding the group of individuals who constitute intellectuals in societies. Said firstly presents us with Antonio Gramsci's notion, in Prison Notebooks, that "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (1994: 3).

He goes on to explain that those endowed with this intellectual responsibility can be divided into two types in Gramsci's formulation. These are, "the traditional intellectuals such as teachers, priests, and administrators who continue to do the same thing from generation to generation, and second, organic intellectuals whom Gramsci saw as directly connected to classes or enterprises that used intellectuals to organise interests, gain more power, get more control" (Ibid, 3 - 4). On the other extreme, Said cites Julien Benda's much celebrated definition of intellectuals as a "tiny band of super-gifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings who constitute the conscience of mankind" (Ibid, 4).

After a critical evaluation of the two conceptions, Said produces an interesting

definition of his own which is largely based on a synthesis of both. The intellectual, he maintains:

Is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business. The central fact ... is ... that the intellectual is endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, it cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publically to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them), to be someone who cannot be easily co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously. (Ibid, 9)

Said complements his conceptual analysis of the intellectual with two critical questions. These are the questions of loyalty and goal. To begin with the former, he maintains that, "All of us without exception belong to some sort of national, religious or ethnic community: no one ... is above the organic ties that bind the individual to family, community, and ... nationality. ... feeling that your people are threatened with political and sometimes actual physical extinction commits you to its defence" (Ibid, 30). The most important factor in this question of loyalty is language for, as he puts it, every individual intellectual is born into language and it is the principal medium of intellectual activity (Ibid, 20). He further stresses that languages are always national although "the intellectual is obliged to use a national language not only for the obvious reasons of convenience and familiarity but because he or she hopes to impress on the language a particular sound, a special accent, and finally a perspective that is his or her own" (Ibid).

In the question of the native intellectual's goal Said follows Fanon and Césaire's

assertion that the goal of the liberation struggle ought not be confined to the myopic replacement of the white policeman with his native counterpart but focus on “the invention of new souls” (Ibid, 30). In The Wretched of the Earth, Fanon refers to this goal as the “National consciousness, which is not nationalism, [which] is the only thing that will give us an international dimension” (quoted in the introduction to Homi Bhabha ed. Nation and Narration, 1990: 4). Said explains this socialist notion in simpler, practical terms:

To this important task of representing the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reasserting its enduring presence, reinforcing its memory, there must be added something else, which only an intellectual ... has the obligation to fulfill. ... the task ... is explicitly to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others. (1994: 32 - 33)

If the predicament in which South African artists-cum-intellectuals (especially those from the oppressed majority) found themselves was in no way different from other areas which were just recovering from or still under the clutches of colonialism, the manifest conditions differed from place to place such that within that general colonial condition, specific settings and unique responses ensued. Thus, many, including the large part of the South African liberation movement advanced the “CST” theory which meant that the pertaining situation was a Colonialism of a Special Type. The main reason advanced for this theory was the fact that unlike in the traditional colonial set-up characterised by a distant, foreign colonial “mother-country” serving as the chief administrator, both the coloniser and the native, in the South African case, were universally acknowledged inhabitants of the contested geographical area.

The “CST” theory was first advanced in the 1929 Communist International’s Draft Resolution on the South African Question where the “Black Republic Thesis” was formulated. Conceptualised around the thesis’s demand for national liberation as a first stage towards

socialism in South Africa the “CST” theory was adopted in the 1962 South African Communist Party Programme entitled “The Road to South African Freedom.” In the Communist Party booklet, The Red Flag in South Africa: A Popular History of the South African Communist Party (1991), the “CST” theory is summarised thus:

On one level, that of white South Africa, there are all the features of an advanced capitalist state in its final stage of Imperialism ... But on another level, that of ‘ Non-White South Africa’, there are all the features of a colony ... It is this combination of the worst features both of Imperialism and of colonialism, within a single national frontier, which determines the special type of the South African system. (1991: 48)

The popularity of this conceptualisation is evident in the prevalence of themes, concerns, issues and problems of national character over those of socialist orientation.

Serote’s oeuvre constitutes a fairly large corpus of works produced during the momentous period of the last thirty years or so of white minority hegemony in South Africa. As ruminations on and reflections of the most important phase in the history of that country, they are valuable cultural artefacts and historical resources. Serote’s involvement in the liberation struggle and his prominence in the counter-hegemonic cultural resistance that went alongside it offer an interesting, internal, and involved viewpoint which comes, as it were, from ‘below’. He is by far the most prominent artist of the “Soweto renaissance” which dominated the cultural scene during the late sixties and the seventies. This cultural upsurge was actively nurtured by its political vanguard, the Black Consciousness Movement (BC).

The radical ethos of BC writers and their rejection of Eurocentric terms of reference are encapsulated in the statement made by Mthobi Mutloatse in his introduction to Forced Landing (1980):

We will have to *donder* conventional literature: old fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit, and shit on literary convention before we are through; we are going to kick and pull and push and drag literature into the

form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. ... We'll perform all these exciting, painful, therapeutic and educative creative acts until we run out of energy! (1980: 5)

Indeed, in the ensuing debates which basically argue *pro et contra* the subjection of BC literature to the Eurocentric aesthetic standards with the consequent subordination of African cultural values, one concludes that European imperialism is really besieged and seriously decentred on the terrain which is most fundamental to its assumption of superiority: the cultural sphere. In his paper "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer", Kelwyn Sole articulates this eloquently:

In their rejection of white leadership and white expertise, the Black Consciousness writers and performers have brought Eurocentric, Western-derived literary standards into the firing line, as well as the notion that art and literature are a domain of only the privileged few. In its emphasis on communal and relevant art, and its forceful and direct utterance, this literature has at least partly displaced the hegemony of liberal, individualistic notions of literature and presuppositions about its relation to society. (Sole, 1983: 54)

Since the genesis of Black Consciousness, Serote has been in the forefront of developments in South African culture and politics. His political journey and shifts therein - from BC to exile to ANC Member of Parliament - as well as changes in the general social context of the production of his works have affected his writings so much that the writing is a direct extension of the "political" life. In other words, the experience reflected in the literature simultaneously becomes "personal" and "public" throughout. We are presented with an extreme case of a "people's culture" proponent and the three "testers" suggested by Press seem most appropriate.

In order to answer the fundamental question of whether the concept entails a revolutionary strategy whose aims, methods and political analysis can contribute to the undermining of the forms of oppression and exploitation that define South African society Press suggests three issues that are crucial to investigation:

1. the extent to which class or nationalist struggle is prioritised;
2. the role given to “the people” in the formulation “people’s culture”;
3. the consequences of seeing a cultural strategy as subject to the discipline of a political organisation. (1987: 28)

In this thesis, I want to critically explore the phases and tendencies in Serote’s writing. Even though it will not be confined to Press’s “testers” the three questions will form the general basis of the investigation. The study will revolve around the critical analysis of textual contents, contexts, themes, styles, perspectives and shifts therein.

The pattern of phases in Serote’s literature can be roughly sketched as follows. There is the initial BC phase of the exposition of “Black experience” and the bold announcement of the advent of the “new black man”. Emphasis here is placed on displaying the oppressed primarily to themselves and to other sympathetic parties as well as to arouse a sense of pride, identity, solidarity, and vigilance within them as the “black” community. The short poems in Yakhal’inkomo (1972) and Tsetlo (1974) generally belong to this phase. The next phase is the venture into what was later to become Serote’s stylistic trademark, the long autobiographical poem.

Serote’s first long poem, No Baby Must Weep (1975) became a stylistic pathbreaker and elevated its author to the status of a true visionary with its anticipation of the 16 June 1976 upheavals. The poetics of identity are in this phase coupled with a revolutionary consciousness in the sense that the poem’s narrator accepts the true implications of his political awareness which are exile, the joining of the liberation movement and armed struggle. The beacon of the third phase is the production of the novel, To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). Doubtlessly, the novel became the best among the group of novels which came out at this period from the “Soweto” writers because of its imaginative innovations in structural and thematic terms.

The fourth phase consists of the poetry written in exile. In this phase, Serote grapples

with the implications and pressures of political exile in both the private and the public spheres of his life. Deep ruminations about the political situation and praise singing for the struggle, its heroes and the ANC are also prevalent. Three volumes belong to this phase; Behold Mama, Flowers (1978), The Night Keeps Winking (1982) and A Tough Tale (1987). Lastly, we have the post-exile phase which is also comprised of three volumes Third World Express (1992), Come Hope With Me (1994) and Freedom Lament and Song (1997). In these books, Serote explores the painful stages in the experience of South Africa's transition to democracy and responds with his art to the call for reconciliation and national reconstruction made by the ANC. Praises for the ANC and its cadres are more pronounced and the mood is clearly more assertive as the new democracy is embraced and celebrated in spite of the conspicuous shortcomings and threats.

CHAPTER 2

A BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY AND BACKGROUND

Four years before the architects of apartheid, the Nationalist party, took the reins of power Mongane Serote was born. The year was 1944, the place, Sophiatown. Sophiatown occupies a symbolic place in the history of South Africa and in the hearts of the majority of its people. Together with District Six and few other similar areas, Sophiatown stood as symbols for the hope of a possible inter-racial mixing in a South Africa which was becoming more and more nakedly divided on racial lines. When the new apartheid regime demolished these symbols of hope, it sent a clear message that statutory discrimination was the order of the day, that it was more determined to crush dissent than previous regimes in its resolve to advance the subjugation of the black majority. The effect of the demolition of these symbols was more devastating to that section of the educated black elite, who had hoped that the limited interaction with a few white liberals in these tiny corners would develop into something more substantial. The case of the demise of prominent figures of the "Drum" writers of the 1950's is strikingly symbolic of the extreme manifestation of this devastation and crushed expectations..

When Serote was four years old, his family moved to Alexandra, south of Johannesburg, a place that became an ambivalent symbol of a home in his poetry. "Alex" would elicit a mixture of ambivalent but intense emotional reactions from Serote throughout his literary career: concurrent yet contradictory feelings of love, hate, acceptance, rejection, fascination, fear, vulnerability, and so forth. This complex response is discernible in Serote's first poem in the "Alexandra" series, from his first volume, Yakhal'inkomo (1972):

I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty ...

You frighten me, Mama ...
 Alexandra, hell
 What have you done to me? ...
 Alexandra what are you doing to me?...
 Alexandra, I love you . (1972: 30)

Serote was attending primary school in Alexandra when the Bantu Education Act of 1955 was passed. Consequently, he was among the first potential recipients of that education system which was designed to enforce the domination and exploitation of blacks by whites, as specified by H. F. Verwoerd, the then leader of the Nationalists, in his statement to the Senate in 1954, "There is no place for him [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (quoted in Chapman, M. 1982: 13).

The poet's mother worked as a nurse and his father as a self-employed car mechanic and it must have been a conscious reaction of his middle class parents against Bantu Education that ultimately saw young Serote en route to the Sacred Heart College in Leribe, Lesotho. After a year and a half in Lesotho he returned to Alexandra where he attended Alexandra Secondary School. After this he went to Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto, a school which later captured international headlines as the meeting place of the student activists of the June 16, 1976 uprisings. Serote failed his matriculation examinations and subsequently began studying through correspondence.

During this period he discovered the University of Witwatersrand library where he was, for the first time, exposed to extensive reading material. Apparently, it was during Serote's brief stay in Lesotho that his passionate interest in writing began; the later visits to the university library were critical in developing and nurturing his discovered talent. In the interview with Jane Wilkinson, in Talking with African Writers (1990), he reveals that he started by writing thrillers but stopped, "because at school where I was in Lesotho they told me I was wasting time. Subsequently, for some reason or other, I don't know why, I started

writing poetry - if one can call it poetry at that point: I don't know what I was writing, but it was what I thought was poetry" (1990: 175).

After high school Serote worked as a reporter in Johannesburg for the Golden City Post and thereafter, the Rand Daily Mail. Strangely, in a 1974 study by Joy Kuhn entitled Twelve Shades of Black, the section on Serote, "Poet In Anguish", professes to seek to "trace the man from the beginning" (1974: 33) but fails to inform us about what happened first between the job as a reporter and Serote's detention. Instead, Kuhn provides the reader with large photographs of the writer and his neighbourhood's dirty children surrounded by decaying houses as if to make up for the scanty information. She also lists the famous personalities with whom Serote was detained in 1969 under the notorious Terrorism Act, among them, Winnie Mandela, Joyce Sikakane and Peter Magubane, while she fails to clarify the confusion she creates later when the information about Serote's journalism comes out. Kuhn claims that Serote stayed at home in Alexandra after his release, helping his mechanic father and "hoping circumstances wouldn't force him into industry. He edged away from journalism as a career" (Ibid: 35) but, before this we had not been told anything about Serote's journalism which, to me, is one of the most critical aspects in the writer's early phase.

Serote expresses contradictory sentiments concerning his experience as a journalist. Mostly he is critical of the limitations imposed by journalism. In the interview with Kuhn he points that he "wanted to reproduce the thing verbatim. But in a report you categorise things; you say: 'a young beauty queen who was in court was arrested for such-and-such' and no-one knows anything of the real person behind the deed" (Ibid: 35-36). In addition, black (especially African) journalists were continually exposed to brutal harassment and victimisation from the police as dramatised in the horrific scene involving Tsi and Boykie in Serote's To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). However, the positive contribution of journalism to Serote's development as a writer can neither be ignored nor simply discarded.

There has long been a close relationship between black writing and journalism, and writers have used journalism to develop their skills and to reach audiences. Serote himself, though reluctant to speak well of his journalism experience, clearly acknowledges this positive side. In the interview with Wilkinson he says:

Journalism put me in contact with a wide range of people throughout the country and at that time I began to understand what was happening in South Africa. I mean the first thing that really strikes one about South Africa, if you are doing journalism and doing it in the sections I was doing it in, is that there is very extreme and abject poverty. But when one is aware of this one is also aware that there are people who are very, very wealthy, and the demarcation is really colour of skin. Being black means being threatened all the time by poverty, by ignorance, by illiteracy, and as you grow, other things begin to become very clear for you. You realise that by virtue of being where you are, you are always liable to become a prisoner. (1990: 176)

He was arrested in June 1969, tortured and kept in solitary confinement for nine months and thereafter released without being charged. Serote's activism becomes interesting at this point. Besides his overt involvement in the newly founded Black Consciousness Movement (BC) led by the late Steve Biko, a movement which spearheaded the resistance to apartheid from the late sixties until the late seventies, he also claims that he joined an underground cell of the ANC before his prominence in BC. It is this underground work, he suggests to Wilkinson, which drew police attention to him and ultimately led to his detention. By 1972, Serote had participated in various projects organised by the BC student wing, South African Students Organisation (SASO) and in that year he served in SASO's Cultural Committee. In the interview with Seroke he recounts:

We had small units of SASO/BPC [Black People's Convention]. I worked with Strini Moodley and Saths Cooper to form the South African Black Theatre Union. I then went to Mhloti and later Mdali. [Theatre Groups] ... We wanted to conscientise writers and the black public. At that time we had defined our audience as mainly the black community. (1981: 31)

In 1972 Serote's first collection of poems Yakhal'inkomo, was published by Lionel Abrahams's Renoster Books, a newly founded publishing house which had earlier published the acclaimed Sounds of a Cowhide Drum by Mbuyiseli Mtshali. This was Serote's first experience of the difficulties that awaited a black writer in the publishing industry controlled by whites. Abrahams had expressed reservations concerning the title and the cover illustration (done by Thamsanqa Mnyele, Serote's lifelong friend) as well as with the provocative content of some of the poems. He proposed changes to which Serote objected. Serote reveals in the interview with Seroke that together with Biko they ultimately "managed to convince Lionel that he should not change anything in the book" (1981: 31).

The reception of Yakhal'inkomo was an interesting affair, especially since the volume came out shortly after Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, which sold more than 15 000 copies, a record for a black South African writer at the time. Notwithstanding the provocative political content of some of the poems and the witty statements with political connotations in others, Mtshali's collection quickly became popular among white liberal readers. From Nadine Gordimer's preface to the first edition onwards, the book received an overwhelmingly positive reviews from white critics, especially, and the sales reflected its popularity among the white readership. When Yakhal'inkomo appeared, many white readers and critics were dismayed; they condemned the author for being angry and explicitly political. On the other hand, blacks in the townships applauded Serote's bravery and defiance for daring to reflect their mood in spite of the repression.

Although the differences between Mtshali and Serote are overstated since both collections operate within the wider "protest" tradition with only slight differences in their approaches, the comparison persists and Serote seems to have endorsed it. In the interview with Seroke, he states that Mtshali, "was a poet launched from the white community, so to

speak. This is what the papers said of him and this was the way they treated him. Whereas when I came out, there were no doubt: I was clearly associated with black consciousness" (1981: 30). Fortunately, Yakhal'inkomo was not banned, thus suggesting that its political content was tolerable, that is, it did not go as far as to threaten the status quo (as far as the censors were concerned). This may also suggest that critics, especially black critics exaggerated the extent of the volume's political radicalism just like Serote himself.

Two years after the first volume, another volume of poems by Serote was published. This time AD Donker was chosen as the publisher. Like its predecessor, Tsetlo (1974) was mainly composed of short, lyric poems and the title was similarly symbolic. In the prefaces to the volumes, Serote explains that Yakhal'inkomo refers to the cry of cattle at the slaughterhouse while Tsetlo is a tiny bird (*Inqilo* in Xhosa) which is famous among young rural herdboys :

it has a mysterious, weird sweet
whistle which it plays while it flies from
branch to branch in the bush,
luring people to follow it ...
and then it stops.
It may lead you to sweet honey, to a
very dangerous snake or to something
very unusual. (1974: 5)

In the same year, 1974, Serote obtained his long awaited passport and left for the United States of America on a Fullbright scholarship. He completed a degree in Fine Arts at Columbia University, but his overall evaluation of the years he spent in America is that it was a waste of time.

He reiterates this sentiment in many of his interviews, but it seems that his views in this matter are shaped more by his attitude towards the U. S. and its political role in world affairs generally and the "Third World" in particular rather than by the experience itself as it is

evident in the interview with Seroke, "Because of the role the United States is playing in the world, I became aware that my decision to go to America was extremely wrong" (1981: 31). Admittedly, he must have been alienated and confused about the political implications of his choice of country, but to say the experience was a "total waste of time" as he claims in the same interview is far from the truth of the matter, not least because of the influence of African-American culture on his works, especially those that were written during his stay in America.

According to Wilkinson, in America, Serote "participated in the inaugural conference of the African Literature of America at the University of Texas at Austin and toured the U. S. under the auspices of the African Studies Centre of Boston University" (1990: 174). It was also during this stay in the U. S. that he came to know prominent African-American writers like Sonia Sanchez, Quincy Troupe, Paula Jordan, Amiri Bakara, James Baldwin, and others. He also met many African exiles from the independent countries of Africa and this consequently presented an opportunity for him to explore the implications of post independence neo-imperialism particularly in Africa. He concedes to Wilkinson that, for the first time, he was exposed to a wide variety of good literature which was banned or unavailable in South Africa. This includes African-American literature, Marxist-Leninist revolutionary writings and the African revolutionary literature of writers like Amilcar Cabral and Franz Fanon.

The formal aspect of this American experience was obviously alienating, as he points out in the interview with Wilkinson :

First of all, my scholarship was for studying writing. By the time I arrived in the States I had begun to look at myself as a writer. ... here I was at the university, learning how to write. I attended lectures and disagreed a whole lot with what the professors were saying and with what some of the students were saying writing means. ... but there is something about American culture which is completely unacceptable to me. The commercialization of life. (Ibid: 180)

To worsen matters he found that the film courses he had signed up for required him to violate his moral principles. For instance, he had to discuss topics like lesbianism and homosexuality as part of the curriculum.

In the interview with Wilkinson, however, he admits that in spite of his feelings he did gain something in America although he immediately seeks to trivialise this gain. His exposure to the American political scene, his meeting with African exiles and the political lessons he derived from this exposure must have been crucial in influencing him to change his political loyalties from the romantic Pan Africanism of the BC to the more pragmatic politics of the ANC-led Congress Alliance.

After finishing his studies in the U. S. Serote headed for Botswana where he settled in Gaborone in 1977. Here he met many exiled South African artists, including his friend Thamsanqa Mnyele who had designed the cover illustrations of his three poetry volumes Yakhali'inkomo, Tsetlo, and the long (sixty pages) autobiographical poem No Baby Must Weep which was published by AD Donker in 1975 while he was in the States. Once in Botswana, Serote quickly joined and actively participated in the activities of two important cultural groups, the MEDU Arts Ensemble and the Pelandaba Cultural Effort (Pelculef). The security created by the sense of being near home and his participation in community-oriented collective cultural work similar the SASO projects he participated in the early seventies made Serote happier in Botswana than in the States.

The cultural groups in which Serote involved himself combined artists from different formal backgrounds. Besides going to various communities with didactic projects, and performing for rural and urban audiences, Serote valued the intense theoretical discussions within the groups. Issues like the role of art in the struggle for liberation and in the social lives of ordinary people were prominent, and, most interestingly, theory was closely linked to practice. Serote observes, in the interview with Seroke, that the beliefs and principles of art he

had developed and embraced during his BC days were strengthened at this point:

I value the experience of being in MEDU most. One most important thing in the group is the sense of working together. Where we say there is something called the arts - what is that? Collectively coming to the realisation that in essence we can never separate arts from political consciousness. ... We are consciously saying we are going to understand and express our experiences in the arts. ... and put an effort and energy into organising ourselves so that artists should cease to be just individuals seeking fame and fortune. ... There is an intense need for self-expression among the oppressed in our country. ... I don't mean people saying something about themselves. I mean people making history consciously. (1981: 32)

In 1978 AD Donker published Serote's fourth poetry collection Behold Mama Flowers which was written during his stay in America. Serote dedicated it to his slain comrade Steve Biko, the BC leader who died in the hands of the security police. The volume consists of eleven short poems dedicated to other exiles together with a longer autobiographical poem which continued the stylistic approach started in No Baby Must Weep. After this volume, Serote managed to finish a novel he started before he left South Africa. To Every Birth Its Blood was published by Ravan Press in 1981 and it became an immediate success. The elegant poetic language, the binary structure and other thematic and stylistic innovations soon established the novel as a major contribution and further elevated Serote's standing in South African culture.

At the same time, the sceptical elements who had hitherto believed that black writers of Serote's generation had chosen poetry because it was an easier form and that these writers were ill equipped to tackle the more elaborate structure of the novel were disproved during this same period as other black "Soweto" writers were publishing equally powerful novels, including, among others, Miriam Tlali's Amandla (1980), Sipho Sepamla's A Ride in the Whirlwind (1982) and Mbulelo Mzamane's The Children of Soweto (1982).

A year after the novel a collection of three long poems together with eight drawings by

Thamsanqa Mnyele, The Night Keeps Winking (1982), was published by his Gaborone group, the MEDU Arts Ensemble. This was an interesting, two-pronged exercise. It was, on the one hand, an attempt to escape hostile editorial censorship to which black writers fell victim in the white-controlled publishing houses by establishing an alternative avenue for publishing which would absolutely escape editorial censorship by the commercial publishers. On the other, this was an endeavour to establish a more profound collaboration between the visual arts and written literature in the manner of William Blake.

In the same year, 1982, AD Donker published a volume of Serote's Selected Poems with an introduction by Mbulelo Mzamane, who writes:

Although ... Serote has been the most prolific and probably the most accomplished poet in South Africa, he has nonetheless been sadly neglected by the literary critics. It is hoped that this new selection from his work will help to correct that error of omission. His neglect becomes manifestly clear when it is recalled that nobody has ever paid him such glowing tributes as to write that, 'His is the first sustained voice in our English poetry for at least 20 years'. Yet among the poets of the 1970's, inside South Africa, this statement is probably truer of Serote than of those other poets who have been received in such hyperbolic terms and whose voices have been less 'sustained' than Serote's. (1982: 7)

Indeed it is shocking but sadly true that so many years since Mzamane complained of this irresponsible neglect, not much has improved.

Mzamane further contends:

The idea of bringing together Serote's poems from his various collections should enable us as readers to trace his development more accurately. ... This selection should also enable us to see more clearly the common thread which runs through Serote's poems, that is, his preoccupation with the Black people's struggle for survival and self-determination in South Africa. (Ibid: 10)

Interestingly though, in Black Writers from South Africa (1989), Jane Watts states that,

"Donker turned down some poems instigated by the Soweto uprising and the brutal suppression of it" (1989: 155) in Mzamane's selection. During his stay in Botswana Serote also worked for various ANC structures, in 1983 he was elected as the ANC's head of the Department of Arts and Culture, a position he held until 1986 when he was made the Cultural Attache for Britain and Europe. Serote's main tasks in both of these executive posts involved the propagation, management and co-ordination of the cultural boycott to isolate the apartheid regime in addition to liaising with solidarity groups abroad.

Another long poem A Tough Tale was published in 1987 by Kliptown Publishers in London. The poem was inspired by the 1985 national uprising which saw the whole country on fire. This was followed in 1990 by a collection of his essays and cultural writings, On the Horizon, which was published by the Congress of South African Writers. In 1991 Serote was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Natal in recognition of his outstanding contribution to South African literature in English. A year later, David Philip published yet another long poem Third World Express (1992) in which Serote places the South African struggle within the broader context of "Third World" struggles.

Since the 1990 release of political prisoners and leaders of the liberation movements, several of whom had spent more than a quarter of a century in incarceration, the political situation has been changing at a rapid pace. Overnight the politics of violent confrontation were replaced by negotiations. In his tribute to these efforts at peace and reconciliation, Serote produced Come and Hope With Me, a long poem published by David Philip in 1994. Excerpts from his second novel The Gods of Our Time have already appeared in some literary magazines strengthening hopes that the long awaited novel will be out soon. Freedom, Lament and Song (1997) was published by Mayibuye Books of the University of Western Cape, a David Philip subsidiary. It was written after the 1994 elections and its contents combine a celebration of the post-apartheid democratic dispensation, elegies to fallen comrades and

complaints about counter revolutionary tendencies aimed at undermining the new democracy.

Today, Serote is an ANC member of parliament serving in various cultural committees; he is also one of the advisors to deputy president Thabo Mbeki, who is destined to be the second black South African president after Nelson Mandela. He has these awards in his credit :

- The 1975 Ingrid Jonker Prize
- The AD Donker Prize for his outstanding contribution to Southern African Literature
- The Noma Award (1983) for publishing in Africa (For his long poem Third World Express).

He also sits on the boards of the following cultural organisations :

Chair of the Portfolio Committee on Arts and Culture

Chair of the Johannesburg Art Foundation Council

Patron of the Alexandra Art Centre

Chair of the National Film Trust of South Africa

Chair of the Association of Community Art Centres

Ex-Officio member of Board of Trustees of Dakawa Arts and Crafts Project

Member of the Board of the South African Games (Thebe Subsidiary)

Member of the Board of the South African Music Education Trust.

CHAPTER 3

PRE-SHARPEVILLE POLITICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

A radical nationalist faction, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) broke away from the ANC in 1959. A year later the PAC's anti-pass campaign was met with brutal force by the apartheid regime, resulting in grievous bloodshed on what subsequently became known throughout the world as the Sharpeville Day, 21 March 1960. The main anti-pass protests were held in the townships of Langa and Nyanga near Cape Town and Sharpeville near Johannesburg. All the marches resulted in the senseless killing of unarmed protesters, but the bloodiest was Sharpeville, where sixty-nine people were killed and hundreds wounded. Recounting the fatal incident and its effect in the opening of his paper "Post-Sharpeville Poetry: A Poet's View", which is published in his collection of essays, On the Horizon (1990), Serote writes, "The world, particularly the West, seemed to take serious note for the first time that black people in South Africa are human after sixty-nine people were murdered by the apartheid regime in Sharpeville on 21 March 1960" (1990: 4).

The massacre of people Sharpeville is an important milestone in the modern history of South Africa. Its significance, however, is not confined to the historical and socio-political dimensions but spills over onto various other aspects of life, including the arts in general and literature in particular, hence the functional distinction between the "pre" and "post" Sharpeville literary contexts. It was after Sharpeville that the resistance movement was forced to realise that armed force was necessary to counter apartheid violence and advance the struggle. Thus the stage for thirty years of armed conflict was set.

Before the clampdown which followed Sharpeville there was a vibrant literary and intellectual culture among South African urban blacks which thrived on their co-operation

can be fairly taken to represent the dominant perception of BC writers towards the Drum generation. In this uncompromisingly judgmental essay, Serote writes :

Nat tommed. He tommed while we were rat-racing for survival; he had the time and energy to say to us: "There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it is only we haven't learned how to talk. We replied, Humans ? not enough." One may further ask: "Have your humans learned our language, Nat? You soon found their language, did you find humans? " ... There are two distinct worlds in this South Africa. The gutter-trapped black world, and the opinionated, arrogant racist white world. ... If by going to Parktown, Lower Houghton, Hillbrow and all those places that are supposedly hope amid disaster-bound South Africa, Nat wanted to create humans who would cross the fence to this side and walk the streets with kwashiorkor-battered grey-bellied kids, going to buy magwinya, or humans who would come and walk with Oswald Mtshali at night and sing, "Nightfall, Nightfall, you are my mortal enemy" - poor Nat, you failed. (1982: 40-41)

He concludes this essay with these words: " Poor Nat, he died still believing that he was a non-white" (Ibid: 41) by which he is emphasising Nakasa's archetypal entrapment in what he calls the "brutal white lie" which makes its victims believe that "white is right and might" (Ibid). Thus at the root of the antagonism is the contrasting attitudes to race relations, especially the relationship with liberal whites.

E'skia Mphahlele's insistence in the interview with N.Chabani Manganyi in Soweto Poetry (1982) that the Drum generation's writings were "really proletarian" (1982: 42) is highly extravagant, yet it raises a very crucial issue pertinent to the dominant character of the content and themes of the Drum writers' stories. In his attempt to 'proletarianise' the Drum literary renaissance Mphahlele makes unconvincing claims that only Themba and himself were graduates and "all the others were matric people... and below matric" (Ibid: 43). He further contends, "There was ... a new kind of English being written. Significantly it was a black man writing for the black man. ... Talking a language that would be understood by his own people ... There was no appeal or pleading at all to the white man to try and understand

with a section of progressive liberals and the growing literacy among the urban black population. Drum magazine employed the cream of black intellectuals and artists as reporters and correspondents, thus offering them a chance to reach a wide, mainly urban, audience with their fiction-styled reports. In contrast to BC writers the vast majority of Drum writers were products of missionary education and they subscribed to the liberal humanist ideal which was central to the missionary institution.

As apartheid was spreading its tentacles with one oppressive law after another being passed in the whites-only parliament, these writers' hopes of acceptance into the white world, seemingly promised by their education were crushed. BC writers foresaw the danger of such dependence and rejected assimilation from the onset at the peril of losing financial benefits, the solidarity of and the valuable insight into the white world. There were also the dangers of isolationism and narcissism which threatened to undermine BC strategy in general.

Serote singles out Nakasa as an example of the failure by the Drum generation to take apartheid sufficiently seriously. Their careless treatment of apartheid is implicit in one of the dominant features of their fiction, the cat-and-mouse game between the police and the black characters as well as in their fascination with the "shebeen" culture of wild drinking and irresponsible sex. Consequently, when the (too late) realisation of the seriousness of the reality of apartheid hit them after Sharpeville, it struck them particularly hard because each of them was alone, overwhelmed by awe and disbelief as the age of evil they mistook for a temporary lapse unfolded before their eyes. Ultimately, when their turn to perform the daring cat-and-mouse game played so masterfully by their fictional characters in real life they ran to exile, where loneliness killed some including Nat Nakasa, while realignment with the people's collectives saved others.

Serote's polemic against Nakasa in his article "The Nakasa World" which was first published in 1973 in Contrast number 31 and reprinted in Chapman's Soweto Poetry (1982),

us" (Ibid: 42). The advantage of hindsight, however, shows us that most of these writers were recipients of missionary education and therefore not contaminated by the inferior apartheid Bantu education. Thus, they were the privileged (even if by pure chance), learned intellectuals of the predominantly illiterate black underclass. Nonetheless, as Mphahlele points out, the prevalence of the dominant social comment in their writings was not confined to fiction but was also assertive in other forms including the poetry, academic and journalistic papers. This is an aspect which is usually lost in generalisations, or, as Serote's comment on Nakasa illustrate, bluntly unacknowledged.

Jane Watts's attempt to draw parallels between the thematic development of Mphahlele, a Drum writer, and the BC writers raises two points which are critical for an understanding of the early phase in Serote's writing. In her book Black Writers From South Africa (1989) she asserts:

In his earliest years, [Mphahlele's] writing is white-oriented: he addresses a predominantly white readership, in forms and language of white culture, to record his protest on behalf of his black brothers. (1989: 57)

The total failure of whites to respond to any of the protest or cries for reform, ... led first Mphahlele (who initially had addressed his work almost entirely to white intellectuals and academics) and later black consciousness writers, to withdraw their attention entirely both from whites as subjects and from whites as audience. (Ibid:87)

It is not really a question of whether the Drum generation reflected the burning political issues; rather, it is the manner in which these issues were handled that is critical. However, irrespective of the scathing attacks, sometimes too emotional and unwarranted, it is only fair to acknowledge that the majority of BC writers in the early phase were, directly or indirectly, influenced by their predecessors, the Drum writers, hence the similarities, for instance, in social themes. In fact, some, like Don Mattera and James Mathews participated in

both literary projects. Moreover, the political theme has never really been absent from black writing since the early days of "missionary" writers like Tiyo Soga (b. 1829); S. E. K. Mqhayi (b. 1875); W. W. Gqoba (b. 1840) and others.

In spite of the judgements of later generations and however casual and detached the Drum writers' treatment of apartheid might be purported to have been, the apartheid regime reacted ruthlessly. The naked brutality of Sharpeville, the evils of the 1960 state of emergency which followed it, forced a generation of black writers to exile. While they had chosen exile rather than face imprisonment, the "Publication and Entertainment Act of 1963", argues Watts, "ensured the exile of their writings as effectively as the threat of violence had ensured the exile of their bodies" (Ibid:3).

For years after Sharpeville there was a disturbing silence in both black resistance politics and English literature by blacks. This is the vacuum in which BC writers had to operate and establish themselves in the late 1960s, as Watts observes:

Cut off from the mainstream of western culture by the impoverishment of their Bantu Education they were growing in symbiosis with their community. ... They were a generation politicized by Sharpeville, by the blatant manifestation of power, and by the disillusionment of their elders with the white liberalism that had failed them in their hour of need. (Ibid: 4)

From the onset, the BC and its cultural workers saw their purpose as that of conscientizing the black communities and mobilising them under programme with crudely four objectives a) to eradicate or overcome the inferiority complex that had taken root among the oppressed, b) to undermine the paternalism of white liberalism, c) to affirm black identity and culture to displace negative western stereotypes, and d) to promote self reliance, communalism and solidarity.

CHAPTER 4

THE EARLY POEMS: YAKHAL'INKOMO AND TSETLO

“In dark times an intellectual is very often looked to by members of his or her nationality to represent, speak out for, and testify to the sufferings of that nationality.” (Said, E. 1994: 32)

In 1972, Yakhal'inkomo, Serote's first volume of poetry was published by Lionel Abrahams' Renoster Books which had recently published Mtshali's path-breaking Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971). Although the differences between these two poets at this stage are sometimes overstated, it is an undeniable fact that Serote's emergence is directly connected to the cultural and political revival led by the BC while this explicit link cannot be observed in Mtshali. The cover illustration of the 1983 edition, part of a series of illustrations by Thami Mnyele, depicts a figure of a naked pregnant woman with a bundle of a toddler on her back. Both figures articulate the mood of sadness with their painful stares; the mother is staring down at the ground while the little child on her back is looking away from our gaze into the dark background. Although the lean, sad, figures strikingly highlight suffering there is also an underlying confidence anticipated by the representation of the figures as the only source of light.

In the preface, Serote explains the significance of the Xhosa phrase which gives the volume its title. Literally, it refers to the cry and rage of cattle at the slaughter place. The phrase was popularised by Mankunku Ngozi the Cape Town saxophonist who released a classic jazz album with the same title in 1968. The poetry in this volume is by implication inspired by the rage of the bellowing cattle at the slaughter place as they twist, rattle and shake the kraal, which is a symbol of enslavement, and by the energetic rhythms of jazz which also

sprang out of the conditions of slavery. It is this energy which is observed by the poet as he witnesses Mankunku playing his tune, *Yakhal'inkomo*, his face "inflated like a balloon, ...wet with sweat, his eyes huge and red. He grew tall, shrank coiled into himself, uncoiled and the cry came out of his horn" (1972: 6).

The inflated face of the saxophonist and Mnyele's pregnant figure reinforce a sense of anticipated newness or birth which threads through the poet's early works, *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972) and *Tsetlo* (1974). This anticipation, however, is characterised by an implicit fear, ambiguity and uncertainty which are suggested in the gruesome, deformed figure in the cover illustration of the latter volume and the description of *tsetlo* in the preface as a bird with a luring sweet whistle which "may lead you to sweet honey, to a very dangerous snake or to something very unusual".

Although residues of the appealing voice of protest which is characteristic of Mtshali's tone is recognisable in Serote's early poems, the direction or audience for such protests is not white readership as in the case of the former. Where one might argue that the addressee is a white person as in the opening poem in *Yakhal'inkomo*, "The actual dialogue", it will be noticeable that far from an appeal, Serote's tone is scornfully defiant of the "Baas" and assertive of the new mood of black reawakening that was advocated by the BC. His statement in the poem:

Do not fear Baas.
 It's just that I appeared
 And our faces met
 In this black night that's like me.
 Do not fear -
 We will always meet
 When you do not expect me.
 I will appear
 In the night that's black like me ...
 (*Yakhal'inkomo*, 9)

is significantly bold in its assertion of the fearlessness of the speaker, profoundly sarcastic in its repetition of the capitalized "Baas" and highly political in its emphasis on the speaker's pride in his blackness which he announces without shame or reservation. This overtly BC declaration of black pride is juxtaposed in the formal structure of the poem to the mocking address of the oppressor by his material name which it simultaneously undercuts with acute consistency.

If Mtshali's poems depicted helplessly defeated, powerless blacks who could therefore regard whites as a source (or even the only source) of change due to their power, Serote's rejection of this premise is equally unmistakable. Instead he follows BC's dictum, "blackman you're on your own" and consciously addresses his poems to the black masses in an endeavour to sensitize them to their historical predicament. In "They do it" Serote flatly scorns the "liberal" whites' attempt to cleanse their guilty consciences by having a few blacks in their daily "tea parties" and study groups. He recognises this as a calculated stalling tactic of the wealthy exploiters and oppressors against the necessary social revolution:

They dapple the house
 With the black of an Indian or the black like mine
 Then they smile. Broader.
 The image of 'crocodile tears'
 See?
 To repeat is when I continue
 Poetry of monotony
 So let's stop, we need change. (Yakhal'inkomo, 23)

It is significant to note that even here, the primary addressee is the oppressed who falls for the trappings of "white lies" as emphasised in the forceful last line. Whenever we encounter whites in this phase, they are presented in the context of the confrontation which marks black and white social relations as in "A poem on black and white" or in a critical exposition of their greed in "She sat".

The nakedness of white violence and hypocrisy is captured with a resonating directness in "Anonymous throbs + a dream" where the speaker states, "Look at that white man / he drags my sister's thing in the dark" (Tsetlo, 54). Similarly, the political truth in "What's in this black 'shit'" is evident in the direct use of simple language which condemns the system from a firm basis in the radical, critical perspective of the urban masses:

Now I'm talking about this:
 `Shit' you hear an old woman say,
 Right there, squeezed in her little match-box
 With her fatness and gigantic life experience
 Which makes her a child,
 'Cause next day she's right there,
 right there serving tea to the woman
 Who's lying in bed at 10 a.m. sick with wealth,
 Which she's prepared to give her life for
 `Rather than you marry my son or daughter'
 (Yakhal'inkomo, 16)

The matter-of-fact address of the subject makes the attack on the structural pillars of oppression more acute and more scathing and replicates it is the authentic "view from below".

The uncompromising accusation of whites as the major cause and conscious perpetrators of black misery becomes more direct in "Black bells" the last poem in the volume. In "Black bells", the ambiguity of the tone of the opening poem, "Do not fear Baas" is exchanged for a more radical, more confrontational voice which is in tune with the mood of the suppressed anger in the former poem which is bubbling over and refusing containment, "You've trapped me whitey! Memm wanna go aot Fuck / Pchwee e ep booboduboooodu blll / ... Flesh blood words shitrr Haai" (Yakha'inkomo, 62). The title, "Black bells" is strikingly precise in evoking the celebration of the advent of the BC's "New Blackman". Similarly, in concert with the BC's rejection of both white culture and its terms of reference, Serote rejects the white hippie cult which originated in the United States of America in the 1960s and took

the world by storm in the 1970s in "Hippie or happy".

In their particular rejection of the stifling aspects of western culture and aesthetic standards BC writers managed to free African perceptions of art from the manacles of the western-cum-colonial dictates and thus redirected focus on the revival of African aesthetic norms for inspiration as was long advocated by writers like H. I. E. Dhlomo in the 1940s. This is eloquently captured in Chapman's assertion that the BC literary renaissance "has boldly taken a Eurocentric South African Literary Establishment by the scruff of the neck and dragged it into an arena robustly and challengingly South African" (1982: 23). This radical tactical development also had significant implications for the balance of powers in the racist colonial regime of the South Africa of the 1970s.

Even though arguments abound that the attitude and choice of form were dialectically fostered by the draconian aspects of the system such as Bantu education and censorship to mention but a few, we need not forget the obsession of literature by blacks with politics which stretches from the early days of Rubusana, Wauchope, Gqoba and Mqhayi, those of Plaatje followed by Dhlomo and Abrahams who were in turn followed by the likes of Mphahlele, Themba, Matthews, up to the BC writers of the seventies. The latter could not but inherit the dominant tradition of black literature enforced on them not only by their ancestors but by their environment as well. This also does not come as a surprise if one notes the dominant trend of mutual relationship between the national liberation struggle and black cultural forms.

In Soweto Poetry (1982), a paper propounding the concept of a black aesthetic, "Black Criticism and Black Aesthetics" by David Maughan Brown, notes three major areas in which the "black aesthetic" differs from the western. First of all, Maughan-Brown asserts the fundamentally functional character of art in Africa; secondly he points out that "the traditional African context, both of society and art, places a greater emphasis on community" (1982: 52). The third major point "lies in the modes of perception" (Ibid, 53) he argues, and quotes

Senghor, who maintains that:

The African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomic, it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis. (Ibid)

Similarly, in Black Writers from South Africa: Towards a discourse of Liberation (1989), Jane Watts argues that despite their urbanisation, South African black "writers nevertheless carry within them a consciousness of the traditional role of the artist in African society" (1989: 21). She is referring to the role of the imbongi in traditional society which is explained in "The Uses of Traditional Oral Forms in Black South African Literature" by Mbulelo Mzamane in Landeg White and Tim Couzens's Literature and Society in South Africa (1984) thus:

In traditional society while the poet is praising, he also points out absurdities and pitfalls. The king listens carefully because he knows that what is being condemned by the imbongi is what is generally said by the rank and file, who are less sacrosanct than the court poet. The poet is the conscience of the nation. ... The poet provides the necessary checks to the authority and balance to a king's self indulgent and despotic tendencies. The operative maxim is that "inkosi yinkosi ngabantu" (Xhosa) or "morena ke morena ka batho" (Sotho). (1984: 139)

In the BC phase of Serote's literature the praise is directed towards black culture and identity while condemnation is preserved for the entire white establishment.

Arguing the commonness of "theme, approach and overall expression which transcends style and individual manner of thinking" among black writing of the seventies in his paper "Black Writing Today" which appeared in Soweto Poetry (1982), the poet Mafika Gwala lists

four fundamental characteristics:

- 1 It brings into focus the complex nature of ghetto life.
- 2 It stimulates an awareness of positive values in indigenous culture, which was in no way inferior to European culture if taken within its own context.
- 3 It draws lines between the traditional African cults of blacks and the decadent Western cults such as the Satan cults, nudism, the hippie cult, etc.
- 4 It is not only concerned with racial oppression, but also points out the shortcomings of orthodox modern awareness - the inverted idealism in hankering after bourgeois securities, the purposeless desperation of ghetto blacks and (in general) the alienation of the black in apartheid society. (1982: 169)

The first major theme in Serote's early poetry is the examination, analysis and depiction of the experience of blacks under apartheid. In Mzamane's words:

Serote's poems thus attempt to get to the 'root' causes ... of the social maladies which afflict the Black community; to reassess his experiences and redefine his position in relation to the socio-economic and the political situation in South Africa. (Selected Poems, 13)

Following Mzamane, Watts identifies the poem "Ofay watcher looks back" as his most important statement of poetic intent. She maintains:

The thematic line used as a leitmotif - "I want to look at what happened" - encapsulates the poet's motivating force ... and explains the aim ... His writing can be seen as a continuous re-working of the past - at first to come to terms with his own and his community's pain and anger, then to analyse the history of his people's struggle against oppression, and finally to act as a dynamic force, propelling the liberation movement. (1989: 157)

Perhaps more than any of his colleagues, Serote has adopted the role and style of the traditional Imbongi upon himself. Subsequently, most of the dominant features of traditional praise poetry identified by Ruth Finnegan are visibly adopted and redirected in his poetry.

Finnegan's list of these marked stylistic features in Oral Literature in Africa (1970) includes the extensive use of parallelism, repetition and chiasmus (cross-parallelism), use of figurative language, allusions, metaphors and hyperboles, and use of ideophones and interjections (1970: 131 - 137). Interestingly, irrelevant features such as the tendency to use archaic language in traditional praise poetry are discarded as the political purpose dictates the use of 'simple words' accessible to the masses.

However, praise poetry mainly owes its popularity to BC poets and cultural workers in general to its social significance which is "bound up with the aristocratic nature of the Southern Bantu societies" (Finnegan, 1970: 141). Finnegan articulates the critical functions of traditional praise poetry in contemporary society thus:

In societies where status and birth were so important, the praise poems served to consolidate these values. ... As elsewhere, however, praises could contain criticism as well as eulogy, a pressure to conform to expectations as well as praise for actual behaviour. *In this way, praise poetry could also have the implicit result of exerting control on a ruler. ... The poems also acted as an inducement to action and ambition. ... [They are used to] express pride in the possessions, [institutions] and values of the peoples among whom they were recited. ... Praise poetry is also a vehicle for the recording of history as viewed by the poets.* (Ibid, 141 - 142; my emphasis)

Jeff Opland's definition of the role of the Imbongi in "The isolation of the Xhosa Oral Poet" follows Archie Majefe's formulation that the main function of the Xhosa Imbongi is like that of "an ancient Celtic bard, to 'to interpret public opinion and organise it'" (in White and Couzens (eds), 1984:176). In post-colonial South Africa, the traditional role of the Imbongi as a mediator and a political critic was corrupted by despots who despised any form of criticism and encouraged flattery, thus discrediting the institution. The BC cultural workers sought to actively reverse this regression by reinstating the traditional public role of the Imbongi. The significant, underlying feature of this public role is the focus of the comment on the present, lived experience.

According to Watts, "the majority of African writers ... have used themselves as mirrors, and their picture of society has depended on the reflections of themselves" (Ibid: 108). Consequently, the distance between the speaking persona who narrates the poem and the poet is so thin it is almost non-existent. Thus, as Mzamane points out, when the poet speaks he is the voice of the silent masses, their eyes and ears, hence the representativeness of the first person, autobiographical mode of address and the dominance of material from personal experience.

The atmosphere of the dusty townships maintains a heavy presence in Serote's depiction of 'black experience'. It is through the reflection of the conditions under which his people live as well as through his analysis of their reactions thereto that Serote tries to raise their awareness. "Morning walk" introduces us to the poet in his social context. The walk is presented in a simple, factual tone which makes it routine, thus conversely presenting the poet as a serious observer who is an individual but one that is rooted in the society where he has a special function: to observe and communicate the contemporary situation.

Like the first person narrator, Alexandra is used as a representative of the general situation in the black townships all over South Africa. In "Alexandra" the poet declares his love and commitment to this place of his roots, his "mother", but he also voices his fear of this hostile urban landscape in explicit statements like, "You wear expressions like you would be nasty to me / ... you are bloody cruel" (Yakhal'inkomo, 30).

At the same time, he voices his reaction to this "cruel" environment, "I feel I have sunk to such meekness/ I lie flat while others walk on me to far places" (Ibid, 31) and by reflecting it to the community he is trying to raise their consciousness. The concluding lines of the poem subtly assert the BC theme of the revival of identity under the rubric of blackness while also reenacting the submissive reaction of blacks to their oppression, "And under the rubble I lay, / Simple and Black" (Ibid).

"Amen! Alexandra" records the pain and despair of the community witnessing the demolition of their erstwhile protective sanctuary by bulldozers sent by the apartheid regime. As the speaker observes the people's endurance of harassment and misery he also notes their passivity and thus implicitly indicts them for complicity: "we nod, / like we have so long ago in time, / we nod, / for we have nodded for worst moments" (Tsetlo, 14). "Another Alexandra" depicts a place whose deterioration has worsened. Opening with images of death in the moaning women and the "slaughter sheep", decay in the children who play on a "rabble heap", and despair in the picture of men sitting on the "stoep staring straight into space" (Tsetlo, 59), the overall picture is distressingly grim. This is a place of drunkenness, prostitution, violence and murder.

Significantly, the principal victims of this violence and suffering are women as their dominance as subjects clearly implies: the poem opens with moving portrayals of moaning women and little girls who are raped. This culminates in the last stanza which figuratively connects the suffering of these women to that of Alexandra thus reinforcing the metaphor of 'home' as a suffering, violated woman:

i cannot look
 for your legs are chained apart
 and your dirty petticoat is soaked in blood
 blood from your ravaged wound. (Ibid, 60)

The association of mother with Alexandra, South Africa and ultimately Africa and Third World later is interesting in Serote's literary development from concern with mainly national to continental to international issues.

It is easy to see why Watts concurs with Mzamane that "Ofay-Watcher looks back" captures the "motivating force ... and explains the aim" (1989: 157) and that it is also, "[Serote's] most important statement of poetic intent" (Ibid). It is the structural construction

that elevates the poem. Its highly self-conscious use of language highlights one of Serote's distinguishing features. The poet's use of repetition as in purely oral forms is effective in both his "statement of intent", the declaration, "I want to look at what happened" which opens and concludes the poem. The statement is repeated emphatically after every five lines to effect rhythm and homogeneity. In all these instances, it is followed by the short line, "That done" which systematically, harmoniously slows the rhythm and emulates the extended pause in traditional orature.

The extended pause is the structurally designed time for the progressive interaction of the spectators whether singing and clapping along in song, ululations and whistles of encouragement in oral literature. An exemplary instance of the concept can be observed upon a visit to a traditional healer where the patients and other people in the ceremony are required to answer "Siyavuma!" (we agree) at intervals alternating with his or her voice, etc. Thus the spectator is not merely an abstract part of the artistic production but an organic part that drives the process of that production, a nodal point to which the poet must constantly return.

Repetition becomes a useful stylistic device which does not only ensure the attention and participation of the audience but it is also crucial in the maintenance of coherence, the prevention of the poem from disintegrating into incoherent, unrelated fragments, a feature which becomes more significant in the longer poems where the threat of fragmentation is greatest. Thus, in the long poems not only words and phrases, but also large passages, are repeated. Repetition also links with another overt influence in Serote's poetic style, the rhythm of jazz. Jazz, according to Khulile Nxumalo, "functions by establishing a basic rhythm and then allowing a free range of improvisation [spontaneous variations] around this basic rhythm" (in Robin Malan ed. *A Poetry Companion to Worldscapes and New Inscapes*, 1998: 176).

Returning to the poem, if the interrogative tone of the repeated phrase "That done" as well as its sound effect, slackens the rapid tempo of the line preceding it, its dialectic relation

to it is demonstrated by the former's anticipation of that same tempo's resumption in the following line. The latter line is consistent, in the sense of repetition as a formal feature, in both the fact that it begins with the striking phrase, "As silent", which always introduces an absolute statement with a dense cluster of plant imagery, and the fact that it appears exactly after the former. Although these lines are also separated by five lines, the "silent" plant imagery they articulate is expertly and logically moulded into an organic picture beginning with "the roots ... [which] pierce the soil" (l. 3), then the plant shows "the colour: green" (l. 9), followed by its acquisition of the "life of a plant which makes you see it" (l. 15), then ultimately it blooms " and the eye tells you: something has happened" (l. 21).

Another ritualistically recurring line, "I look at what happened", slightly ebbs the flow again in anticipation of the wave of direct, specific statements of political protest and mass conscientization. This line is also unique in that even though it echoes the opening "statement of intent", the strategic, improvisational omission of "want to" enhances the desire to the practical level and at the same time locates itself naturally, to the pulse of the poem's rhythm. In this typical, intricate craftiness which reveals a commitment to the poetical and the political, Serote authenticates his status as a modern urban Imbongi.

The emphasis on "Black Experience" and the predominance of "ghetto" images sums up the mood of this early phase in Serote's poetry. There are two major motives; to awaken the consciousness of the masses to the oppressive situation to which they are unjustly subjected, and, to firmly establish and authenticate the poet's role as the "cultural worker" whose allegiance to the masses is a matter of strict principles. This political choice, compelled by the position of the majority of black writers as part of the suppressed working class, cannot be regarded as stifling "their whole creative energy" (1989: 23) as Watts insinuates but as simple consistency with their consciousness of their context and their role.

In "Ofay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase: Phase IV" Serote stresses this community

orientation:

I come from down there below,
 My friends are tender people who look old
 They are wild
 Like rats living in an empty room,
 They are meek like sheep following the other blindly,
 They and I come from down there below,
 Down there below the bottom. (Yakhal'inkomo, 58-9)

There is also an implicit, but clearly conscientizing effort in the sarcastic comparison of "friends" to the ambiguous mixture of "wild" rats and "meek" sheep. This critique of the black community's passivity develops into a scathing attack on "Black Man-child", the father-figure who encapsulates this apathy.

The severity of the criticism of this father-figure is dramatic, open and thorough in "Introit":

flat like a long dead reptile
 I lie here while my load clutches my heart like a
 frightened child
 And the horrors of my stomach throb to my eyes
 I am a black manchild
 I am he who has defeated defeat. (Tsetlo, 20)

In "The face of a happening", this passive attitude is implicitly associated with the retreat of the individual into the inner self which is condemned, "And I sit and look through the gap between the curtains / And I feel like saying this is not the way to look at the world" (Yakhal'inkomo, 47).

The keyword in the description of manchild is "silence". While the mother is compared to the symbol of strength, the "tree", in "Ripe falling fruits", the father-figure is silent as "the dry river / ... His silence - the silence of a fruit / That's ripe, that may fall" (Ibid, 40). In a later

poem, "Anonymous throbs + a dream" he is reduced to a scavenger in "throb ii" where his characteristic stooping posture is described:

when I come walking the streets ...
and my shoulders hanging like a loose telephone wire
why my children holler 'Papa, Papa, Papa'
and I just look away as if to count my toes. (Tsetlo, 53)

The objective of this introspective reflection on the psyche of the father-figure is to awaken the consciousness. If he starts to reflect on the unjust aspects of his everyday life he is compelled to make an analysis thereof and thus uncover their political causes and, conversely, the political essence of any serious response to them.

Thus, the ability of "man-child" to discover his real identity and the proper response to the situation is guaranteed by the sincerity and openness of the introspection. The more directly he deals with the objective truth about the situation and himself, the closer he becomes to the BC notion of transformation. Subsequently, when he becomes disgusted with himself after the much needed self examination as in "Anonymous throbs + a dream" (throb I), he comes to terms with his uselessness which is implicit in the image of an old car wreck and he thus commences his political awakening.

Similar to "man-child", the young ghetto males' misdirected anger expressed in their criminal aggressiveness towards their own people is condemned in poems like "The clothes", "My brothers in the street", "What's wrong with people", "Personal talk + lament", and other poems addressing the "black experience" theme. Like his father, the young male is another burden on the shoulders and a nightmare in the eyes of the woman. The parasitic, criminal tendencies of the young knife-wielding "tsotsis" within the community are dramatised in "Murderer, his mother and life" where the speaker witnesses a senseless killing and mugging spree by "tsotsis" and observes one of the young boy-murderers. The observation of the

violent night elicits moving denunciatory remarks:

Alexandra,
 Alas
 these streets this earth is bloody
 Alexandra
 Is a cage of insane beasts born of black women. (Tsetlo, 44)

In "Anonymous throbs + a dream", "throb VI" however, this endemic violence of the "tsotsis" is explained with the metaphor of "restless", "wounded bulls" while reference to them as "brothers" here and elsewhere depicts a sympathy born of the recognition of their revolutionary potential and an understanding of the dynamics of the context. The revolution cannot afford to ignore an active component of the youth of the very oppressed social group it seeks to emancipate.

There is, as in "The face of a happening", the constant and prevalent emphasis on the critical need for the redirection of the misdirected violence that characterises township experience:

We, the huge men that we are,
 Are just like small boys:
 We page things,
 Truth, love, time,
 Like boys bored by a book.
 We rage at each other. (Ibid, 48)

The juxtaposition of the mother-figure to the father-figure is conspicuous, and consistent. In contrast to the silence of the speaker and his friend in "The three mothers", the resourceful characters are deliberately highlighted as women. It is Elizabeth who "feeds" them, Hilda who "urges us on! On! not to fall" and it is a woman, Alina, who is the addressee of the confessional concluding lines, "No son hates his mother be sure; / But love can wound" (Yakhal'inkomo, 28). The woman becomes not only the supreme victim and target of the

prevailing situation, but the source and symbol of strength and inspiration as well.

The strength in the characterisation of Serote's women at this stage lies in their unfailing ability to act as agents of conscientization, to shake up and awaken the figurative father-figure to his appalling reaction to the social predicament. In "A poem" it is the direct interference by the woman which speeds up the symbolic death of the "man-child" figure and the birth of the "new" black man:

having packed her dresses and petticoats neat in her heart
and her long hidden manhood,
emerged
in her eyes which were as bold as defiance
her face
folded shadows cold as gathered clouds
as her voice pierced him
he bled
fear dripping down his trousers
and when his frail hand went up his mind fell in
like the heap of soil on the grave. (Tsetlo, 17)

This does not suggest that we never encounter negative images of women in the poems. In "Murderer, his mother and life", the shebeen queen is presented as a "cold-eyed woman / seated on an armchair / a throne of death" (Ibid, 44-5). The negative portrayal becomes more acute when the speaker refers to her servant who is:

... buttockless
eyeless
sexless
empty woman ...
her chest flat
as if her breasts had been removed. (Ibid, 45)

The treatment of this particular theme is striking in its revelation of the ambiguity in the attitude towards the shebeen queen. The chauvinistic language used in "Anonymous throbs

+ a dream" (throb IV), "Look now this black woman looks at me / with eyes sticking out as big as her arse" (Ibid, 54) is both offensive and typical of the ambivalent attitudes of the whole BC movement to black women. By contrast, "Beerhall queen", an earlier poem, illustrates a much greater and analytical understanding of the social implications and roots of the shebeen culture as well as the "shebeen queen".

The dominant attitude in the poetry, however, is the explicit affinity with the mother-figure as subtly captured in "Milk and corn". The poem opens with an argument which appears to blame the mother for bringing the speaker into this cruel world. At the beginning of the poem, the created initial impression is that the mother's milk compared unfavourably with the "wise" corn. As the poem develops, however, it is clear that the tone changes and the irony of the fact that the mother does not fear other seasons like the "wise" corn is registered thus reinforcing the dominant affinity towards the mother-figure. In other poems like the "Alexandra series", "Mama we" and "A poem" there is a very strong sense of aligning the mother metaphor with birth as well as with the South Africa and the African continent.

Even in the earliest phase of his literary development, Serote produced unique poems which combined the expression of the observed, experienced, general social landscape and the particular political message being communicated. The best example in this category is "City Johannesburg" which opens with a direct, but also satirical association of the city with the most visible manifestation of apartheid, the notorious pass laws. The insatiable greed of the city is blamed for the "lean wallet" and a stomach that "groans a friendly smile to hunger" (Yakhal'inkomo, 12). The devastation of the individual and social world of blacks attributed to the city is highlighted by its juxtaposition to the township. The latter's common negative attributes are temporarily transferred to the devouring, monstrous city.

Ultimately, the powerful indictment of the dominant mode of production, as represented by the city, for its direct responsibility in the subjugation of blacks:

I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
 In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
 And everything about you says it,
 That, that is all you need of me. ...
 Listen when I tell you,
 There is no fun, nothing, in it,
 When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions, ...
 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death. (Ibid, 12-13)

Here, the combination of the simplicity of the language and the political commitment produces the desired effect of exposing the predatory essence of the capitalist society and thus putting blame where it directly belongs, on the fundamental organisation of the whole society.

Jane Wilkinson unpacks the irony of the modernisation and capitalist development represented by the city in "Serote's Cities: (De-)Constructing South African Urban Space" (1994), where she argues:

Instead of providing access and communication, promoting movement and therefore, potentially, progression and change, the Johannesburg roads are themselves imprinted with the marks of the racial division and dehumanising mechanisation imposed upon the workers by the system. 'Root'-like, tentacular, they 'anchor' the dichotomic relationship of 'might' vs. 'feebleness' on which the city's power is based, into the poet's mind and body. Carrying their erosive, life-sapping influence into all that comes within their range, they penetrate and absorb both the poet and his non-city place of origin. (In Boehmer et al., 1994: 91-92)

Wilkinson also captures the significance of the combined 'iron' and 'monster' imagery used to undermine the glamour which is symbolised by the city, "In "City Johannesburg" ... the city is no longer inscribed within a geometric form. It appears as a viscous, mobile, octopus-like monster, drawing the surrounding territory into its omnipotent and all-devouring net and recalling the mythological swallowing monsters of South African orature" (Ibid, 91).

In "Burning cigarette" and "Her name is Dootie" we are confronted with the entangling restrictions on the lives of black children, the systematic limitation of their potential and

development. In addition to the violence they encounter in their poor homes and rough neighbourhoods, black children are exposed to the police bullet as observed in "Ofay-Watcher, throbs phase XI". After observing a growing baby in "Watching a baby grow" he reacts with fear: "Kid, I'll tell you, / I watched life and I got a fright" (Ibid, 43).

Later on this concern with the predicament of black children focuses on the plight of "homeless children". In "A sleeping black boy", the poet observes the harsh life of a "glue sniffer" and blames an abstract adult public for his ultimate, tragic death:

his lullaby is the hiss of the water from the pond and the roaring steel river;
and the eyes of adults passing by
dart around like bubbles of boiling water -
this small boy will die one day
his lips stuck together, glued by the glue he smokes. (Tsetlo, 37)

"Eyes over my shoulder" opens with a forcefully touching image of a "street" kid who is rejected by well off peers and the world outside.

There is also an explicit concern for the township elderly, especially the old woman, whose suffering, resilient figure is to be found scattered throughout the pages of this early poetry. "Ofay-old people" as the title indicates, is the observation of old people from the ghetto. They are described as "sunset eyes people" whose "clothes hang on bones, / Pull the body down" (Yakhal'inkomo, 56). They owe their precariousness to their "long journey" through life which brought them to the present period of retrospection and nostalgia where their activity is simply "Watching and waiting to die" according to the speaker.

In "This old woman" the grandmother is presented as frail and old but also wise and useful. She is not only frail due to her age but also due to being "an old knitted jersey / Worn and torn / By her children and children's children" (Ibid, 11). The grandmother icon of wisdom and protection in oral literature is evoked in "Street-lights and houses" where the child speaker

passionately requests her to tell a story in order to comfort him/her in the face of the unfolding hostile life. To satisfy the curiosity of the growing consciousness, there is an underlying assertion that conscientizing, political questions like those in the last ten lines of the poem, cannot be avoided.

The speaker's dream in the poem is not just a bad dream but an allegory of black experience whose torturous, incomprehensible essence not only claims but appropriates the comparison with a nightmare. Waking connotes consciousness while the violent suppression thereof is represented by the in the image of an axe wound on his head which follows immediately. The cluster of images of social deprivation and violence introduces us to the causal political dimension of the suffering experienced by the "street-kid" narrator.

The second major theme in this early poetry is the overtly political theme which immediately and directly focuses on the political questions of the day. Images of birth, death and movement signal the celebration of the death of the old and birth of the new black man of BC. The poem "Christmas" allegorically captures the celebration of the of victory of birth over death:

This day when death frowns,
 For it will know defeat,
 This day when the horizon embraces a woman's stomach
 For out of there he fell and went to exile,
 This day that we catch on
 As flames lick fuel. (Yakhal'inkomo, 15)

While the biblical figure of Jesus highlights the confidence, the closing image of "flames" assert a specific material character to the picture.

The poem "What's in this black 'Shit'" culminates with the dramatic episode between the defiant speaker and a bureaucrat at the pass office:

The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg,
 So I said, hard and with all my might, 'Shit'!
 I felt a little better
 But what's good I said it in his face,
 A thing my father wouldn't dare do,
 That's what's in this black 'Shit'. (Ibid, 16)

It must be acknowledged that this is still a low level of individual political awareness where the individual is only just awakening to his situation to find it frustratingly prejudiced against him whereas he needs to redirect the isolated individual outbursts into the organised political strategy of the community.

The pillage of truth, hopes, and pains that presents the speaker at a political crossroads in "Lost or found world" concludes with a philosophical rendition of the political slogan, "There comes a time in the life of the oppressed when there remains two choices, to submit or to fight". Thus an aspect of the organic knowledge of the revolutionary masses is acknowledged and consciously preserved, as it were, in this passage:

Old wishes are present deeds,
 Bright with blinding for the old
 Dark with wonder for the new -
 That's where we are:
 Lost or found world. (Ibid, 29)

"Hell, well, heavens" celebrates the symbolic rebirth of the speaker and the tone as well as the repeated gesture to the "brother" implicitly indicate the embrace of the revolutionary "brother", a comrade. The confidence, which is suggested by the energetic African jazz, "Mankunku's horn" and "Thoko's voice", and African art, "Dumile's figure", in the poem is reinforced by the rhythm created by the repetition, "I do not know where i have been, / But Brother / I know I'm coming" (Ibid, 24). The announcement of this declaration is greeted with the adoption of active images of nature as symbols for this attainment of

confidence through political consciousness. These 'nature' figures, the "river", the "tide", the "storm", the "lightning thunder", all water images, become significant and common as political metaphors. In "Movement, moulding, moment" this political awakening is conceptualised in terms of the images of waking up, the sun, birth, dawn and darkness.

While "Waking up, the sun, the body" adopts a similar deployment of imagery, we are also confronted by the question of violence which, together with other fears, weighs heavily upon the individual conscience at this political crossroads. After a lengthy introspection, the question of violence elicits suicidal thoughts and a strikingly humanistic conclusion:

I feel so cold towards life:
 That day when for once I laid it on my fingers
 Trying to pull it like one snaps a thread;
 For what do you do when, again and again,
 Things around you beg you with a painful embrace to hate,
 And you respond with a rage and you know,
 That you can never hate. (Ibid, 35)

The tension caused by the antagonistic forces of violence and passivity effect an ambiguous attitude as the speaker is torn between his peaceful disposition and the need for counter-violence which is forced upon him by the objective situation in the last stanza of "That's not my wish":

To talk of myself,
 I hate to hate,
 But how often has it been
 I could not hate enough. (Ibid, 41)

Later, memory and sight which respectively represent history and political consciousness come to play a dominant presence in the political symbolism as in "Ofay-Watcher, throbs-phase I". In "phase III" of the same poem the "seed" and "tree" images are

incorporated into the "river" image, which, as the symbol of the life of the revolution, becomes the most dominant image in later works. The life of a river makes a striking analogy with the life of the revolution and the 'river' metaphor has been used by writer-revolutionaries all over the world in their description of the character of the revolution. The most notable instance is its dominant use in Trotsky's seminal account of the Russian revolution, The History of the Russian Revolution (1977).

The accuracy of the symbol is not captured more succinctly than in "During thoughts after ofay watching" where the poet writes:

We are caught up in a turning tide,
 The river flows, the river ebbs, ...
 If the water is not red and salty
 The odour is there and our minds are crimson ...
 ... the river that flows and ebbs, dries to dust at times ...
 Where the waves break before they ripen,
 Many will break there,
 Many will not become waves, they will peep and perish. (Ibid, 54)

The ups and downs of the revolution, its failure and success, its changes, its speed or pace, its moods, are all encapsulated in the figure of the river.

Most importantly, representation does not downplay the shortcomings, as clearly expressed in the passage, or the laboriousness of the process that is captured in the closing lines:

One day we'll wake up, ...
 And the reeds of the river will be dry like skeleton bones
 And the river shall be heard,
 Flowing, flowing on, and on,
 The route will be long and straight,
 The bubbles will burst, like eyes looking back,
 The river shall flow like the song of birds (Ibid, 54)

are more effective for their sincerity and refusal to romanticise the growth into organised political consciousness.

The political theme is manifested from different angles in Tsetlo but a clear sense of continuity with the earlier poems is recognisable. The powerful opening stanzas in "Personal talk + lament" capture the mixture of frustration, anger and also confidence and responsibility as further suggested by the final line, "I don't like that joke". Notably, the spontaneous individual reaction is presented, once more, as lacking in political direction, misdirected in its reaction and simply not political enough to express the crucial notion of agency in the political sense.

The historical perspective is explicit in "Durban" which closes with the lines, "where everybody's heart is a powderkeg / postponed / by a second since that last century when the ship came / ... and a disastrous moment was made" (Tsetlo, 32). The search for the eloquent, simple metaphor for the acquired political consciousness continues in the tree image highlighted in "The seed and the saints", "Trees" and "Don M. banned". "The seed and the saints" opens with a self-consciously powerful, assertive voice which replies to the nagging questions of identity, "who am I, what's my purpose? ...", explicit and prevalent in the early phase of conscientization.

In this poem, the seed which grows to become a nourishing tree is a metaphor for the birth of a conscious political subject. The qualities of strength, firmness, protection, nourishment, growth, etc in a tree are effective as a metaphoric description of some of the fundamental qualities of both the revolution and the revolutionary. The selection of leaders from what used to be the radical left camp of the "Third World" to whom he defiantly pays tribute and announces affinity in the poem exposes the depth of the speaker's political commitment.

In "Trees", the tree as a symbol of strength is accorded the possession of knowledge

through personification and contrasted with the victims of apartheid who are oblivious to their situation while trees, birds, the sky and the earth are witnessing it. The speaker compares his people with the natural phenomena which cannot act and concludes thus, "but we are man, / and man pays his price" (Tsetlo, 33). "For Don M. - banned" is a dedication to the poet's colleague and fellow BC cultural worker Don Mattera who was banned several times under apartheid. The tree is again presented as a symbol of resilience and Mattera is urged to learn its vigour and prevalence during harsh seasons.

The whole apartheid period is captured in the loaded metaphor of a dry white season. Its white colour evokes the cold, harsh images of ice, frost, steel, etc. and also alludes to whites. The harshness of the season is demonstrated in the silent death of the leaves as if by murderous strangulation. It is also implicit in the extraordinary image of erect trees, "dry like steel, their branches dry like wire" (Tsetlo, 58), which serve to inspire the banned poet. Ultimately, the transience of seasons that is emphasised in the last line registers the confidence in victory over apartheid that is compared to the winter season. As implied by the theme of heroism in the above poem, we witness here a growing fascination with resistance politics from a perspective of an insider.

Thus, the fraternity we encounter in poems like "Won't you cross over" and "For Don. M. - banned" is comradeship more than just friendship, or literal brotherhood. In the former, the speaker who has lost his activist "brother" warns of the violent consequences of apartheid repression:

if my brother weeps like that
 lies like that
 remember me when glass dust rains on us
 that once when I looked at him, tears ran down my cheek. (Tsetlo, 61)

The poet juxtaposes the images of light and darkness in order to capture the experience of

imprisonment in "Shadows and rays" . The allusion to solitary confinement highlights the "political" nature of the imprisonment of the speaker.

From the dark cold cell, the speaker spends his day watching the sunrays. The entry of sunrays inside the cell symbolises hope as captured in the imagined "sound" of the sun against the "steel wall" which alludes to the anticipation of freedom. The application of the onomatopoeic word "tap" in reference to the sound of light on steel evokes the action of a hammer, a popular symbol of the working class. Significantly, the experience is not viewed as the final moment but as a passing dark chapter that always lurks in the inter-spaces of the life of a revolutionary.

"Sunset" is the climax of the political trend. As the title suggests, the poem records the end of a day, and the anticipation of the dark night that leads to the dawn of a new day. The poem opens with a bold threat of an incomprehensible calamity which is implicit in the image of the sun which "bleeds like a giant's eye" (Tsetlo, 62). As indicated by the dramatic vow in the opening line, the speaker looks forward to this anticipated day of "sunset" (the happening) with striking enthusiasm for even though the day promises violence and bloodshed to all, especially the oppressed, for him it also carries the more attractive guarantee of emancipation.

There is a determined appropriation of the day as the one that will belong to him not by hope and prayer but, by hard work and solid determination as implicit in the statement:

that day will be night
 that day -
 Will lie gently before my feet,
 tamed by me. (Ibid)

Even though the price in human sacrifice is so great that the speaker cannot face its sight, choosing "to shade the horror away" by closing his eyes with the palm of his hand, he nevertheless accept the necessity of what needs to be done as well as his role therein.

The "loin" represents strength and regenerative power and explains the speaker's ultimate, no longer wavering, acceptance of the "violent option". This acceptance and all the excitement, "it will be a brand new destination, / ... black child's laughter will ring in the dark sky" (Ibid), are significantly not allowed to downplay the effect of the violence as the concluding line highlights, "I wonder where I'll cleanse my hands". Again we witness the reluctance with which violence as a solution is embraced a tendency which reflects the situation of the banned ANC.

The criticism of the black petty-bourgeois in "A glance" is sharp and satiric. He is one of those funny creatures you encounter in dreams that you cannot describe fully. His oppressively tight "shoestrings" and "tie" symbolise his enslavement by civilisation. The poem dramatises a morning after the speaker's encounter with a prostitute which he now regrets. This encounter is preceded by a visit to a shebeen, driven by an urge to get "some peace". This wrong reaction to the oppressive situation is also condemned in Serote's first novel. Similarly, the old friend who is visited by the speaker in "A Friend - Zuma" is scathingly presented as an apathetic petty-bourgeois:

He sits there on the sofa, reptile style,
 Long and flat with indifference
 His head and eyes askance all the way throughout our talk.
 Hope talk to him is mockery. (Tsetlo, 40)

Interestingly, it is in this period that Serote writes some of the most beautiful love poems in his entire oeuvre. These poems are fascinating in their exposition of the tension in the private sphere of human relations and the exploration of the effect of the socio-political context on that private sphere. Thus the spillover of the political questions onto the most private aspects of black experience is exposed. The poem, "On top of a breath", opens with a romantic image of the speaker and his lover as "tall buildings which no wind blows" which

recalls Shakespeare's "ever fixed" lighthouse in sonnet 116. This romantic mode however, is undercut by the consciousness of the powerful effect of context in, "she and i walk on top of a breath which heaves below us". Consequently, the greater part of the poem focuses on the contextual social question which, by implication, permanently disturbs the promise of romance in both the structure and theme of the poem as well as in real life.

Similarly, the romantic mood which is promised by the personal nickname of the lover "honey-child" and the flowing romantic diction that characterise the first section of the poem is also permanently interrupted by the socio-political situation. In juxtaposition to the romantic employment of the dominant "eye" image as an organ of emotional contact, it (the eye) is used, in the second section, as image of political awareness and violence, leading inevitably to separation:

a dark pit dark with depth
 there we stand, both of us a little weary with experience
 maybe you wait to hear from me,
 but our hearts have been bruised, ...
 that's the cue not to extend a hand. (Tsetlo, 10)

"1 Jan 1972" records a lost love which seems to have been so dull the speaker doubts or at least displays an unsettling ambiguity pertaining to its existence initially. The loss of love implicit in the uncertain language of the first stanza together with the distancing implicit in stanza two strengthens the suggestion of the death of feeling as do the assertive closing lines:

Now that we part
 Is it not nakedness?
 The shedding of familiarity, is a mood of loneliness
 But that I breathe and my sea flows
 Is it not wise?
 To shrug off that which I do not understand,
 Hoping to understand
 While now, first comes the new things? (Tsetlo, 63)

Thus, these love poems consistently and deliberately break with the "formal" conventions of love poetry while remaining authentic to the political and functional character of the whole project.

It is notable that in Serote's early poetry, an explicit political rope binds the diverse major thematic categories under the social and the political aspects of the BC espoused 'black experience'. The major development, in this early phase, is the move from the gloomy pictures of despair and their underlying pessimism to an assertive optimism that marks the confidence in the masses and heightened faith in the liberation struggle. Notably, the themes of 'black experience' that dominate the greater part of this phase slowly but surely gives way to particularly political poems which are celebrations of consciousness thus heralding the critical moment of the attainment of the agency which is conferred by the struggle to the oppressed.

Thus, Serote situates his voice within the oppressed masses and, like the traditional Imbongi, exposes and condemns the corruption of the rulers, mirrors the condition of the oppressed for the world and their own awareness, and, as a social analyst and political activist, his is an active participation in the making, shaping, directing and recording of history. Two grand themes dominate the poetry of this early phase; aspects of 'black experience' and political conscientization. The former relates to the focus on highlighting issues confronting blacks especially in the urban townships, these include racism, black identity, exploitation, apathy, treatment of women, children and the elderly, social and moral disintegration, crime, violence, etc., while the latter focusses on winning the ideological war for the minds of the oppressed with the objective of turning their passivity and fragmentation into an active revolutionary force in the service of the liberation struggle.

CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST LONG POEM: NO BABY MUST WEEP

“One of the main functions that poetry serves in traditional African life is to record and preserve, for the future, events of great importance in the nation. Its repetition in public on important national days is not only a source of entertainment but it is also a source of education and information to both old and young. And because of this important role that poetry serves in the nation, the national poets enjoy a special place in the hearts of the rulers and the general public.” (Bob Leshoai, in Chapman, 1982: 58)

No Baby Must Weep (1975) is Serote's first major effort to write a long poem, a shift from which he has not reversed in subsequent volumes of his published poetry save for a few poems in Behold Mama Flowers (1978) and The Night keeps Winking (1982). This shift is anticipated by the tendency towards longer poems even in the earlier Yakhal'inkomo (1972) and Tsetlo (1974) which were generally lyrical in form. Notably, it was not until 1979 with Ingoapele Madingoane's Africa My Beginnings and Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great that any other black South African writer of the "Soweto" era adopted the form which was, by that time, natural to Serote who had already published both No Baby Must Weep (1975) and Behold Mama Flowers (1978).

The continued use of the long form and the abandonment of the lyric points to the author's perception of its suitability to his project, and this judgement is based on the success of NBMW. The political implications of this shift denote the quest of BC writers to adopt a form which was appropriate to the BC ethos of going back to the roots. It may also owe something to the belief that the immensity of black experience defied any containment in shorter forms, hence the emergence of the novel as a popular form after 1976.

The long poem is also associated with the izibongo of the oral tradition and in adopting the form, Serote carries the legacy of H. I. E. Dhlomo, among others, who sought to

rejuvenate, popularise and adopt the role and the style of the traditional Imbongi. In a 1948 article, "Zulu Folk Poetry", Dhlomo sums up his notion of traditional poetry thus: "[It] does not express the hidden, personal feelings and thoughts of the individual poet only. It reflects and interprets the experiences, thoughts and the times and conditions" (in Chapman ed., 1982: 31). He also warns against adoption of tradition for tradition's sake in his argument that, "The African artist cannot delve successfully into the past unless he understands and has grasped the present. He should interest people in African conditions prevailing today as well as in African tradition and history" (Ibid: 35).

In Oral Literature in Africa (1970), Ruth Finnegan's discussion of panegyric raises relevant points to an understanding of Serote's poetry at this stage and onwards. Finnegan identifies the praise poems or izibongo of the Bantu peoples of South Africa as among the most specialised and complex forms of poetry in Africa (1970: 121). She further explains the character of the form thus:

These praise poems have been described as intermediary between epic and ode, a combination of exclamatory narration and laudatory apostrophizing. A certain amount of narrative is involved - the descriptions of battles or hunts, and the exploits of the hero. But the general treatment is dramatic and panegyric, marked by a tone of high solemnity and lofty adulatory style. The expression is typically obscure and intense, and the descriptions are presented in figurative terms, with allusions to people and places and the formalised and poetic praise names of heroes. (Ibid, 121-122)

Most important in Finnegan's discussion is her assertion that, "Although normally addressed to distinguished human beings, praise poems can be concerned with almost anything - animals, divining bones, beer, birds, clans" (Ibid, 122). These general characteristics of traditional praise poetry give invaluable insight to the stylistic and thematic features of the form which are adopted and utilised by Serote in his project of paying tribute to the struggle for liberation.

NBMW was published a few months before the 1976 uprising, and it projects the

future in the way it anticipates both the eruption of those violent incidents and the fate of many black youth, including the author, in its aftermath. As the title shows, the poem is concerned with the implications of the growing militancy of the youth prior to the uprising. While the poet observes and warns of the bloodshed that will inevitably result from the violence he also warns the young freedom fighters about the maturity, the gravity and other implications of their choice or rather the choice to which their history compels them.

He warns that if the children venture into the world of experience they are forced to relinquish the innocence of childhood that is symbolised in the title by weeping. Significantly, the book is dedicated to the author's four brothers, thus, symbolically recalling the preparation of young warriors for battle. The three-line poem in the preface warns of a coming day of changes and declares that if the time to make that day has arrived, no baby must weep.

The poem opens with an address to the 'black mother', requesting her company, her "hand", her blessings, in the journey that the speaker is about to undertake. The mother is a metaphor for Africa and one of the central symbols in "negritude", the term is also used more literally to pay homage to and applaud black women. The speaker's request of the hand, the organ of action, is a very symbolic opening. Immediately, the hand that is so eagerly embraced by the speaker is highlighted by a proud description of its characteristics, condition and function.

We discover that the speaker's embrace of the mother figure is not just a romantic escape from the harsh present to the comforts of an inaccessible past which can only be recreated in the minds of men as substitute to acting upon harsh reality. It is an embrace of the people's suffering and a declaration of a connection that is not just solidarity but oneness with them, their plight and their struggles.

As the union of hands symbolises action, this oneness becomes oneness in action as implicit in the dominant images of suffering and exploitation evoked by the repeated emphasis

on the hand as well as the congestion of words which reinforce action such as sweat, odour, toil, and labour in the very first stanza of the poem. As the speaker boldly declares his unity in action with his working class roots, he grows with the experience (working class and black experience are interchangeably used). Thus, his social condition plays a major role in shaping his outlook and his perception. Significantly, it is the son who plays the vanguard role by leading the mother rather than vice versa and notably he leads her to the street. This suggests the poet's subscription to the central role of students and youth in the revolution which was prevalent at the period.

The political significance of the street motif as the site of the struggle for liberation in Serote and its juxtaposition to the home will be explored further in the chapter on To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). The street is a place where the bloody contest between the forces of oppression and liberation take place, a space dominated and contaminated by various forms of violence, especially in an authoritarian regime. Due to its danger, parents try to shield their children from the destructive effects of this public experience, but the speaker's mature analysis fosters his early realisation that it is a necessary site to venture into in the process of growing up.

This bold step into the dangerous, public domain represented by the streets, which are ruled by the security forces that protect and perpetuate oppression, is a defiant reclamation of the usurped "kingdom" mentioned earlier, which is ruled by the "whistle that tears / into the dark / like a sharp blade through a piece of cloth" (7). Thus the advent of a new black man who is bold enough to enter the ring with the Goliath of oppression and defiant enough to announce his claim to his usurped country is proclaimed. Like Shakespeare's Caliban, the speaker immediately publicly condemns the Prosperos that rule his land by force and violence.

After this powerful opening, the poet goes on to detail the pain, suffering and humiliation which characterise his life under the illegitimate rule of his kingdom. His abuse is

emphasised by the image of fences tearing the flesh of the speaker while his crouching, creeping and crawling pose is symbolic of his enslavement. Surviving the flesh tearing "barbed wire" captures the experience of living in the townships under constant harassment by the police. The speaker takes us through the period of his early initiation to the dictates of survival in the ghetto, thus continuing the theme of 'black experience' which is dominant in his earlier volumes.

The speaker comes across as the poet himself, addressing his own mother, confessing all the inevitable trespasses of his childhood in Alexandra while holding her by the hand, parading the streets with her and pointing out the sites of his activities as he walks and narrates. He tells of his "street secrets" (8), the loss of his virginity at a young age to an equally young girl, the loss of his innocence as denoted by the loss of that 'innocent sleep of childhood' and the new concern with matters pertaining to emotional feelings which comes with maturity. Thus the autobiographical style that dominates the poetry henceforth was initiated.

Maturity brings with it the concern with his kingdom, which belongs to him only in his memory. This is the recollection of the bitter history of defeat and oppression as implicit in the survey of the decaying, rebellious township life which is the consequent of that history. Like other dominant leitmotifs of the night, the mother, the wound, 'memory' is significant, complex and ambiguous. At the most basic level, this metaphor captures the mixture of the theme of black experience, particularly oppression and exploitation, as well as individual, communal or political reactions thereto. Thus later, as the optimism increases, memory does not signify the effects of oppression as the dominating force but resistance and the political struggle carried forward by the liberation movement and its cadres.

The speaker's childhood friend, Tlogi, whom he recalls, is a child rebel who is close to the speaker but detested by the 'mother' who, in this case, is an authority figure. His

disappearance subtly foregrounds the simultaneous individual and political essence of the effects of the situation. The young speaker recalls how his mother tried to protect him by sending him to school and to church while he wanted to be a "caddie or a garden boy" (11) like his less fortunate peers. When he matures, he realises that he can neither be a servant to whites nor a member of the educated elite but a revolutionary. He communicates this to his figurative "mother" and since they are both disappointed and disadvantaged by oppression he can only request her to walk with him, to the public battlefield, the street.

As they march on, the speaker turns the subject to the father-figure on whom the character of Molope, Tsi's father in To Every Birth Its Blood, is built. This stereotypic father-figure and the negative attitude adopted regarding his depiction is recurrent in Serote's early writing, and his coinage in earlier poems, 'manchild', captures the figure's characterisation. He is someone's father, a dedicated urban township family man, a disciplinarian and a Christian; he respects the law and his comic attachment to sensationalised public political life is reinforced by his funny, stupid appearance.

Critical of his father as he is, the speaker nevertheless repeatedly declares his love and indebtedness to him for providing a home, a mother and a family for him. He acknowledges his similarities to him with the image of little lambs who follow older ones to feed and drink in the veld, but he also stresses the differences:

but if you follow the tracks
when my foot prints got larger they made their own paths
he took me to church and I walked out of the other door
i dreamt he took me to school and i never learnt. (12)

The speaker also confesses that he too is burdened by the same wound which secretly consumes his father and makes him keep his eyes on the ground. This metaphor of the wound (also very common in Serote's writing) represents the political oppression to which the speaker now turns his attention.

We are told that this wound humiliates him and "loads" his "eyes down" as it does his father. Like memory, the wound is a metaphor for defeat and subjugation. However, instead of pacifying the young man as it did his father, it agitates him. As he tries to understand it and shake its hold, he is compelled to question the things he had previously taken for granted. It carries him, as he puts it,

out of what i know
 into what i discover i know
 and i wonder
 what else is there. (12-13)

In short, his concern with political issues enlarges his critical scope. (A similar argument is implicitly propounded with Oupa and other youth in TEBIB). In his search for some form of relief or remedy to his pain, and answers to his questions he discovers that the sun, the moon, the trees, the sky, the shadows and time are silent and irresponsible to his plea.

As he "shifts and shifts" in his chair in agitation he also discovers that the wound can be expressed as the longing for the freedom that refuses to be born, and it becomes clear to him that he shares the pain with other people, the eyes and the faces he sees, the voices he hears. Thus, the wound becomes the "pulsating pain of those [he] love[s]" (13) which he can touch. He also discovers that the tense faces of his people in pain are waiting for his arrival for their deliverance, but he has no confidence in his ability to fulfil their expectations yet and fears that his contaminated hands will spoil the petals of the flower and he will be condemned.

The train of thoughts on the political subject becomes a long nightmare which haunts the speaker and robs him of sleep. It unsettles his soul, alienates him and propels him around the township landscape where he observes the decay, overcrowdedness, filth, the suffocating odour of the mixture of foul smells and as he looks through a window of one of the small houses, all he sees before him is the dryness of the karoo which recalls the 'dry white season' alluded to in "For Don M. Banned".

In the centre of this semi-desert dryness, the speaker visualises a young boy sitting on a "throne" of stone. He is a "face wiped out by winds" (14) whose robes "tell about his mother". The boy's mother immediately assumes a plural form as she becomes the representative of all the women of Africa, whose memories are filled with their loss of their status as 'queens' of the land as well as the country itself. With the knowledge of the history of conquest, which fills the remembering consciousness, comes the stride out of passivity to commitment and action.

The symbolic throne of this young prince evokes the image of Jesus and his crown of thorns and, as the latter was crucified by the Jews in his own time and place, the young boy-prince is crowned by the dry desert weather of the karoo, a symbol of the harshness of his environment: he is "caught by time [and] place" (15), by the 'dry white season'. Ironically, this is a place which is supposed to nurture him like a mother and to provide and protect him at his tender age. The effect of the situation on the symbolic child, who represents both innocence and the future, so overcomes the speaker that in a dramatic turn, he directly addresses the oppressors whose "palace of tombstones" (15) is juxtaposed to the "wreckage" which defines Alexandra.

Interestingly, he also admits that his dedicated observation of life in Alexandra, and implicitly his writing, is a coping mechanism of some sort, "i want to go back now/ to my stoep/ where the wreckage i know will pass by and i can almost forget" (15). As he looks at Alexandra from his stoep the mess that confronts him and the memories of his bloodstains, his suffering, of which the wrecked car just outside his house stand as a constant reminder, propel him to ponder his social role, "alexandra, / will I then be able to fight outside my house" (16) he reflects.

This wrecked car in the street in which children play as they speedily gallop out of their innocence stands as another recurrent image in the poem. Similar to the bulldozer, the car

is a product and symbol of modernisation, civilisation, industrial progress, etc, but in spite of its utility and convenience it foregrounds the inhumanity of this progress on those it tramples, the workers (black in this case) whose blood and sweat build the cars for the capitalists (in this case white) while they are systematically excluded from such benefits.

The speaker's reaction to this challenging mess is passivity, despair and alienation, a manchildhood which is similar to the drunken escapism of Tsi in TEBIB. His helplessness, frustration and retreat into his subjectivity are represented as the shame of masturbation which is implicit in his posture as he urinates on the dark street. While he is lost in the pleasure he sees, through the floodlights of an oncoming car, the dirty stream water which slowly moves towards the sea and imagines the blood that must be mixed with the sea-bound water and concludes, "surely, the sea must be having a large red map from the waters" (17). However, his knowledge of the purifying power of sea water compels him to envy it as it contrasts the contamination of his locale which is beyond and above its cleansing capabilities. This attitude will change later when he has moved out of despair and alienation.

Ultimately his subjectivity leads him to thoughts about his death since life around him is "hell". (Serote poses this as a logical conclusion to the individual's withdrawal into the psychic subjectivity in defiance of his social essence.) He imagines millions of eyes seeing into his nakedness and his thoughts are distracted by the noise of a loving couple, after which another passing car "just hangs the dirty linen in public with its lights" (17), confirming his fear. However, he is not deterred in his evening "ofay watching" and surveillance of the township amid roaring cars and barking dogs, a return to the 'black experience' exposition of the early poems.

Out of his observation of the dogs he accidentally stumbles into a seemingly casual discovery that "a dog whose tail is itching is in trouble, / ... because it can merry go round and want to scream, / but never, / reach the itch although it has teeth" (17-18). At closer look,

however, this casualness disappears and what appeared at first to be a comic, playful poetic humour is in fact the shocking self-discovery of the speaker, his confrontation with himself as a dog in the depths of the psyche he has been probing. Thus at the opposite pole to the annihilation that is presented as the ultimate result subjectivity there is a possibility of conscientization.

His aimless roaming, his rambling and his drunken escapism mimic a dog troubled by an itch in its tail, yet he is not a dog, and his pain is not an itch. The poet plays on the spitting sounds of words to emphasise his disgust at his condition:

itch
 this is not an itch
 it is not an itch i tell you so much ...
 maybe lingering screams banging from this pitch pit. (18)

Disgust soon transforms to anger as his hope and love vanish while hatred which "rushes in like a domestic servant summoned by her master" (18) fills him. This simile serves a dual purpose. First, it captures the speedy response of the speaker's irate mood, and, secondly, it also brings the socio-economic source of his predicament to the surface by means of a subtle hint on the economic dimension of social relations.

As the twin-waves of anger and hatred rise within him, the speaker can no longer constrain himself; he wants to return to his observation of township streets, but he can manage only two lines as his emotions coincide with the political concern and compels him to confront socio-political issues as the real cause of his anguish and misery. Subsequently, he turns to directly confront the white madam of the domestic servant whom he ironically addresses as "this girl", thus turning a derogative term used by whites to refer to their domestics against them.

The significance of the ill-treatment of domestic workers is its representativeness of a

whole socio-political ethos which exposes the nexus between political oppression and economic exploitation. The speaker blames this representative of the oppressors for creating and perpetuating a systematic condition of exploitation and inequality and denounces her as well as the practice she represents. Her false, mocking smile which is an allusion to the friendliness of white liberals, is rejected and returned with an immediate suspension of compassion suggested in the shutting of his heart in his back pocket.

The celebration of the militant, outspoken and confrontational mood of BC culminates in the blunt transgression and open defiance of the terms of reference of the status quo which holds whites superior to blacks and thus expects blacks to be subservient. This militancy as when the madam is told to go to hell and when the master, the "baas", is looked straight in his "green eyes" and his racist paternalism is mocked, goes with self assertion. It marks the stage of self-awareness which is the basic tenet in the BC approach.

Angered by the heated confrontation with the major cause of his predicament, the speaker returns to his home, the hell described earlier, where he listens to jazz-blues. Since he has been changed by conscientizing confrontation, the music now makes him feel "funny, / like i was searching gently, gently around a healing wound" (19). In the next line the 'wound' becomes an unforgettable scar made by men and weapons, easy to open and knowing no racial boundary. The poet here sounds a warning to the looming racial war and highlights the oppressors's delusion about their monopoly over access to and use of arms while simultaneously strengthening the hopes of the oppressed masses by suggesting the attainability of weapons for an armed revolution, "men and weapons are like adults and children ... / they discover each other soon / and such things don't think much about who's coated what colour" (20). Like other extended metaphors, the significance of the wound oscillates between the metaphoric and the literal sometimes effecting confusion and obscurity.

The speaker emphasises the forcefulness of the historical situation in effecting changes

in attitudes and approaches with the declaration that time, "is the ingredient of discovery" (20). The repeated stress on time announces the hour of the arrival of the new black man, assuring us that this will lead to a new era, "after this day, the moment that comes must be brand new / like a baby" (20). Significantly, time, ie. history, enables the speaker and his younger brother to discover each other as brothers in arms.

The rhythmic walk captured prosodically with the constant request for the mother's hand and company in the journey is still maintained but, as a build up to the implicit authentication of the violent option as a means to liberation, the address substitutes 'mother' for 'brother'. The walk reaches a crucial stage as it evokes a guerrilla offensive or a journey to the military camps in exile:

let's take a walk
 take off your shoes and socks now
 the footsteps must fall like dew on the grass
 soft
 let them be gentle with this earth
 like a hen that sits on its eggs
 because after this day, the moment that comes must be brand new
 like a baby. (20)

The dawn of this new era will also witness the destruction of the old practice of divide and rule and its replacement with a search "for new words" (20). (This is an implicit reference to the anticipated displacement of the old views of literature, poetry and writing which BC writers openly advocated.) This turning point in the thematic development of the poem corresponds to the political militancy of black youth as represented by the speaker and his brother, and records the radical hardening of their attitudes against the system shortly before the 1976 tragedy.

The role of BC political mobilization drive which was at its peak (even in other parts of the world such as the U. S. and the Caribbean), cannot be underrated in this upsurge. Tom

Lodge captures this point articulately in Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945 (1983):

The Black Consciousness movement from its start had a larger constituency and because of the absence of an effective national political organisation worked through more informal channels of influence. Merely because its exponents and identifiable followers were relatively socially privileged and hence unrepresentative of the black community as a whole did not mean they were not popularly influential. The student advocates of Black Consciousness were to become school teachers, priests and journalists, and its basic themes were taken up in the popular press, in township cultural events, and even ... in African consumer-oriented advertising. (1983: 324)

This political development of the growth of BC and its concurrent militancy, is celebrated with a burst of intensive figurative language accompanied by a cluster of word and sound repetition, elevating the rhythm to impressive, musical heights of poetic grandeur. The congestion of images of physical nature, the earth, the trees, the sun, which is dominated by the image of the flowing river, the only symbol of movement among the static images, figuratively signals the significant shift from passivity and alienation to political commitment and active engagement in the struggles of the masses..

The language depicts the speaker and his brother flowing with the movement of the dark, snake-like river whose mobility is highlighted in its repetitive, tearing, noise which stands in contrast to the language denoting the passivity that qualifies the images juxtaposed to it. The direction of their steps as they walk their journey symbolically leads from the wilderness of the jungle to the ordered urban streets:

the sun burnt my face
 the wind blew my ears
 the mountains were shifting, giving way to the tar
 something broke
 i heard him sigh. (22)

The tearing and breaking constantly heard by the speaker evoke echoes of the clashes with an adversary.

The speaker turns to an observation of a trumpet player named Saul, the son of Saul who is described casually as a typical township man. Saul's name is heavily imbued with significant figurative connotations. The Biblical apostle Paul, who changed from the major persecutor of Christians to become the thirteenth apostle is a striking symbol of transformation. We are told that Saul was "ready for an unknown destination", that he was a "brave child" who was "emerging from the red hot memory of things' (23, my emphasis), thus he allegorises the other aspect of the preceding committed characters which is not militaristic but artistic as symbolised by his trumpet.

However, his militancy and significance are not underestimated as his confident defiance of the prophet's hymns (associated with the church, white-western domination and even tradition) with his jazz (newer non-static black idiom characterised by improvisation and experimentation) at his sister's death bed implies. Saul's figure also anticipates a recovery and drawing of lessons from failures as the failure of the trumpet player to play illustrates, thus making the artist a convenient figure for the kind of realistic political project the author is engaged in.

The following section opens with a return to the people who have pushed him beyond love and made him "dead of love". His reaction however, reverts to the subjective withdrawal which appeared to be transcended in the preceding celebration of active political engagement. This is followed with a rather long polemic against the dominant whites, indicting them for the atrocities of their system and bluntly accusing them of inhumanity. Their dead emotions are highlighted by the cluster of animal imagery and Serote's departure from the protest tradition which courted the feelings of the liberal white to whose good heart it pleadingly appealed is manifest in the uncompromising attack on whites.

This blanket treatment of whites and the abusive language employed by the speaker may easily degenerate into the same racism the poet seeks to counter and blur particular issues

and divisions within white circles. Nonetheless, ahistoricism, the tragic conclusion of this kind of leaning towards subjective, essentialist explanation is averted with the introduction of the economic determinant when the speaker presents the figure of a scarecrow caught in the web of greed or Capitalism as a metaphor for the situation of South African whites. Thus an attempt to penetrate and unpack the effects of the complex overlap of racism and capitalism in the formation of the white consciousness is made as was the case in the earlier polemic against the white 'madam'.

The speaker's weariness which is hinted at in the beginning of the section concretises as he is no longer unsure but convinced that he is tired as he probes further and further into his subjective condition. Significantly, he is also "shitlessly tired of talking, writing hoping people can hear a song" (26). In this second sense, tiredness highlights the declaration of the end of an old era of talking and the dawn of the era of rebellion as propagated by the BC and also depicts the poet's self-consciousness regarding the significance of the social function in his writing. Thus he is angry and disappointed that his song "from a child whose heart was broken" (26) is not heard, instead, the very people he seeks to awaken and motivate "want to jive" and "seduce", hence they are rebuked about their irresponsibility and inaction, their 'snoring through a nightmare' and readiness to listen to lies. This is a clear biblical analogy to Noah's community.

The speaker is firmly rooted in the social situation he is analysing and thus sometimes falls into some of the traps to which his subjects of observation are victim, only, in his assumed status as the Imbongi figure, he has to be conscious of the situation and conscientize his primary audience who are also his subjects and fellow sufferers. This is what gives the Imbongi a special status in the minds of the community; it is what defines him, what makes him, what gives him his credibility so that when he speaks, when he points to the flaws of society, whether he is complicit or not, people must listen because he is endowed with a role

and responsibility by the community; it is his job and both poet and the people know it. The job comes with benefits, obligations and politics and the best Imbongi will be the one who stays authentic to the contract of his job: to look for flaws in the society and to conscientize men and women in order to mobilise them around specific socio-political and economic issues. (I'm not oblivious to the patriarchal hierarchy of traditional and modern African life but it is not the issue here.)

The privilege awarded by this office to Serote's speaker allows him to admit his complicity while simultaneously lashing out at his accomplices' irresponsibility and inaction when "everything is fucked up" (27). Observing the present, he contends that it is only in their minds as a self-delusion, a deliberate avoidance of the truth or brainwashing that anyone can believe that there is any benefit for the oppressed in the status quo. As victims, he knows that they are aware of this fact as the depiction of their guilt-ridden posture suggests. Thus, the present is empty, he warns:

and we can only think it was not empty
 people hide their faces and keep their hands behind them
 but their hearts are loaded like rubbish bins that bee-line
 the street waiting for the truck
 their gaits sag
 like a loaded washing-line. (28)

After the observation and the warning follow the rhetorical, conscientizing questions:

what if the future has its back on us
 its head bowed like the sunflower shying away from
 the sun
 the present, shadows move
 and the thunders are muted by the tick of time
 while you and i are talking about talking to each other. (28)

Having observed the gloomy present and the uncertainty of the future he turns to the past, his vivid memory where the misery and humiliation of conquest and oppression are

suggested by the cluster of images of tears and weeping. It is this tortuous history, the source of the unbearable present, which make the children impatient "as a droplet of water on fire" (28). The futility of the children's impatience however, is implicit in the ultimate consumption of the water by the fire in the image which foregrounds their weakness, thus suggesting a pessimistic attitude towards the children and their role in the revolution.

In a typical, brief self-reflection on writing in his context, Serote interestingly captures the dilemma created by the position of the writer as an individual in an oppressive society where progressive statements become insufficient or even nonsense if not accompanied by committed action:

i sit here
 bursting words between my wringing fingers
 sometimes they deflate and hide their roots
 bury the pain for tomorrow
 yesterday the pus spurted out and the smell clung to my nostrils
 I sat back and saw the typewriter staring
 and the whores were still screaming in the night. (29)

Thus, he is aware that the time wasted by those who still believed in peaceful talks, of which he is critical earlier, is also evident in the very process of writing in which he is engaged. Subsequently he implicitly advocates active participation as the only meaningful form of political commitment.

The symbolic passage immediately following this self-consciousness is significant in both structural and thematic terms. It looks unconnected to both the one before and the one after it and slightly disturbs the rhythm suggesting that it was inserted for a specific purpose of dividing the sections of the poem and to highlight the thematic shift. It signals the change from the first section which has largely been concerned with identity and conscientization and ambiguous in its attitude to violence while largely observing and addressing broad issues

resulting from the political situation while exposing the crisis and his position in that context. Now, at the crossroads of the text and the life of the speaker we are confronted with a symbolic passage which not only signals the structural and thematic shifts but also records the speaker's embrace of and justification of violent action as means of liberation.

In the passage, the speaker observes a groping hand, evoking a midwife trying to find and deliver a baby from a hole, but at the moment of inversion, the hole swallows her and the difficult, bloody birth becomes a dark grave, the hole. It is this tragic, violent moment of his time that the speaker confidently embraces in the second section of the poem. The section opens with a series of rhetorical questions which show the speaker's revulsion at his predicament and his final resolve to face the system that causes it with his own actions, no matter how vulnerable he places himself, as the imagery of the hands reinforces.

Now the speaker has reached the point where he knows that only his own hands can deliver him from oppression, therefore it is with his hands that he is immediately concerned, preparing and making sure that they are ready to "grope / this thicket dark of what remains after tongues have wagged" (29). Significantly, having witnessed the failure of talks with interest and foreseen the violent [dark] consequences thereof, amid the witnessing silence of "the stars, the sky, the moon, the mountains and the wind" (29), the speaker [perhaps for the first time in the poem] explicitly commits himself to political action in the failure of talks and accepts the legitimacy of violence without reservations. Silence is also shifted to refer to the natural physical phenomena but still, the silent intended audience [the masses who were being conscientized all along and who are now being mobilised] is implicitly grouped with passive nature while the speaker authenticates his radical shift and extracts their consent. Thus they, "in their silence as they witness / have understood for what it is what had happened" (29).

Interestingly, just when the speaker finally commits himself to action which entails an embrace of the violent option, as if to furnish more immediate reasons for his stance, which he

compares to a bird drinking water its head lifted high up to the sky [implying the confidence, of the BC's "new" blackman], he informs us that with the strength and the love from his deepest heart he pledges, "to reach out / to touch, to feel the human profile" (29). This symbolically embraced "profile" is described as "that half-face / one-eye / half-nose / half-mouth" (30), the mutilated faces and "frail frames" to which the oppressed have been turned by apartheid. The image also metaphorically captures his embrace of that ugly, monstrous, beastly side of human nature, the bestiality sleeping deep inside us which we always, for good reason, avoid awakening.

As a committed freedom fighter-patriot, he is filled with a love so deep it suppresses pain and implants heroism, and the language presents the most painful experiences and decisions (and also the violent thereafter) with a detachment, though still emotional, befitting a military combatant. Consequently, it is with both the detachment and the passion of a soldier or his supposed relish of violence that the speaker collects the pieces of the body of a BC student leader, Ongopotse Tiro, who was murdered by parcel bomb while he was in exile in Botswana in 1974. The assassination of Tiro and other exiles, together with the intensification of the state's repression which was at this point mainly directed against the BC which had filled the political void left after the Sharpeville massacre was very influential in popularising the violent option among the youth as Soweto 1976 and the migration to exile to take up arms would testify later.

Judging by the structural and the symbolic situation of the tribute in the text it seems to have also affected Serote personally and undoubtedly it hardened his own attitude towards the apartheid *status quo* further. In "Feeling the Waters", an article written in 1977 while he was in the U. S. which was also the beginning of his own exile years he wrote:

Tiro died the way his father died, far away from home ... Somebody else in a few weeks (John Dube, ... from Alexandra) was to die the same

way in Zambia. ... Some are in exile some are jail, and most will experience something called the "Terrorism Act Section 6". ... whatever black people do in South Africa, no one has a right to point at them and accuse them of racism. (In Chapman, 1982: 111-112)

The symbolic emphasis on the organ of action, the hand, which also opens this section is accompanied by an announcement of the speaker's implicit commitment to political action and the adoption of a new mood of open confrontation and the acceptance of its implications in the speaker's discourse. It is the hands that calmly perform all the action, picking up the scattered limbs and bowels of the dismembered Tiro and, according to the speaker, ritualistically putting them back together for burial. This emphasised step by step reunification of the dismembered body by own hands (note that the speaker shifts from first person singular to first person plural), symbolically records Tiro as a martyr who lives in the hearts and minds of men and women denoted by the plural "we".

These are the oppressed masses who according to the speaker are so used to burying their children that they resemble a cat devouring its kittens with a calmness of a ritual, "mothers on this side of the world [who] don't weep no more" (31). As suggested by their calmness in moments of tragedy and their focused "stare at the little ones now" (31), what seems to suggest an unrealistic display of insensitivity ironically highlights their heroic courage and their military-like strategizing. Thus, the little ones, the babies from whom the volume derives its title, are the focus of the gaze of both the observing speaker and their community as represented by the mother figure.

Memories of childhood fears where the speaker depended on his mother who, on these occasions, "usurped [his] little weeping heart" (31) are evoked, but he is past that stage now, as he stresses shortly hereafter when he announces, "i am / man / mama / mama i am man who moves slowly embracing a pain" (32). He can not run to the warm stomach and the "kitchen-soiled apron" (31) as the pain that confronts him is social and political, thus the only relevant

mother is, at this stage, the one who facilitates the elimination of the cause of this socio-political wound.

This knowledge brings a touching sense of acceptance of responsibility and a heroic embrace of the dangers ahead. In an overtly political language denoting the prevalent mood of this section, he declares:

alas,
 i have emerged long time ago now,
 i remember you my mama,
 i see that i am the one who has to build this world
 out of dust
 i have to clutch the wound of the trees and the birds
 tame the snakes and make a path,
 come home with my strength
 muscles that can embrace you ...
 i am
 i am
 the child of the hour that assaults me
 the day that casts a shadow over me,
 i am
 i am love and life, a moment of coming centuries
 when your grandchildren must walk;
 their eyes seeing far into the horizon
 deep into the shadow of the earth
 i am
 man
 mama ...
 what has torn my secrets leaving a wound in me
 must lie its bare neck beneath my bare foot. (32-3)

Besides his eloquence, the speaker expresses a deep understanding of the situation to which he is reacting and thus polarises the issue in simple but impressive terms as a conflict between the force of "love and life" against that of oppression which will be relegated to the history where it belongs as it must be crushed beneath his "bare foot". The speaker emphatically rejects the humility, the "age-old faith" which belongs to the mountains, the

rocks and the trees of the earth but which is foreign to the world where the dialectic of the oppressor and the oppressed is played out. This humility which he condemns and rejects is the silence which he associates with his father and his grandfather.

Even though he has taken the resolution to take up arms and we have just noted his outstanding bravery, he does not become one of those unrealistic revolutionaries and soldiers with superficial human feelings. He openly acknowledges his pains and fears which is tantamount to a restatement of his humanity, as it were:

alas
 i wish i could stop weeping
 but mama,
 you in your hope as big as your breasts
 fed me with the mild milk ...
 i'm hurt mama,
 my heart is a wound leaping pain like flames,
 i'm frightened of death. (33)

Interestingly, the qualifying simile implicitly denotes the underlying anger. We are then given a picture of the speaker's unbearable life captured in the metaphor of a "hollow" which is shaped like and means zero or nothing. This reduction to nothingness is an unacceptable debasement and a rude awakening to one "who fell from trees as huge as trunks" (33), hence he can not bear the sight of his grandmother [the huge tree-trunk] who "sits on the stoep / like a dry twig in a flowerpot / her hand frozen in the air" (33). The situation compels him to take a vow of commitment to the plight and the suffering of his people who are represented by the "grand-ma". The depth of the commitment is stressed by the symbolic, ritualistic incision of the speaker's body, his heels. Interestingly, the incised "four-letter" word is not specified and we are left to fill it out. Considering the situation to which he is reacting, hate, pain or any such negative term would seem appropriate, but the driving force behind a revolutionary is a deep sense of love.

Serote's notable generative use of township images is evident in the use of the empty trousers' pockets to capture in one stroke, both the physical-emotional and the material dimensions of the suffering:

granma
mine [eyes] engraved tears on my face
the hole in them is turned out
like the rag of the trouser pocket
it is not me who did it. (34)

Now that the baby is a man, his tears can no longer be innocent, blood flows when he cries and when blood flows, death lurks, including his own. However he knows that he cannot sit by wailing and waiting for his death when he has hands to act as well as options, "many many paths / and / as many culs-de-sac" (34). The most revolutionary and self-sacrificing choice that any young man or woman in the same circumstances and context as the speaker would have undertaken (especially in the perspective of the left wing political camp to which Serote belongs) was to go to exile and join the military wings of the liberation movements. This is the option the speaker chooses as denoted by the metaphor of the river which Serote uses here and in TEBIB to refer to the ANC. Thus the power and the depth of the river is both natural and clandestine. Its flow rejuvenates the speaker, filling him with enthusiasm and confidence in the ultimate possibility of fulfilment of his foremost desire summarised earlier as to crush "what has torn [his] secrets leaving a wound ... beneath [his] bare foot" (33). Thus, it is with the energy of the flow of the river that his dreams can be realised and his ecstasy turned to reality.

There seems to be a word play on "ecstasy" the meaning of which changes in different contexts as the poem progresses. In the first instance it denotes the realisation of the youthful speaker's delightful fantasies of becoming a freedom fighter but in the second instance it refers to the excessive grief caused by the oppressive township context in which he is trapped,

“seeing windows and doors / hearing voices and screams / touching the darkness and the light” (34). In the third case the meaning shifts back to the initial instance, this time reference is to the politically regressive act of dreaming which “smothers to ashes” and in its place memories of his context are awoken.

Segments of images overlap as the speaker recreates the picture of apartheid South Africa as well his place in and reaction to that context as its product. He identifies colonialism together with Christianity as the cardinal cause of his suffering and as agents thereof and perpetrators of oppression, whites are condemned. The uncritical identification of Christianity with colonisation which dominates intellectual understandings of colonisation in both the negritude and neo-Marxist traditions in this era is mainly constituted by emotional reactions and generalisations rather than based on the deep analyses of the complex relationship between the two concepts. This depiction of whites illustrates the point:

these miserable bastards, the people of god
 these things wading the clean earth with their crimson muddy boots
 leaving the grass messy
 these, the image of god broken and made into scare-crows
 blinding the twinkle of the stars with their screams which fly to the sky like
 mad birds. (35)

The introduction of the alliance between Christianity and colonialism in the context is not irrelevant, but instead of the essential exposition of the material dimension of the causes of the conflict, whites in general are presented as devils not people with flesh, blood and feelings like the oppressed and just more greedy or possessing a more organised greed. This makes their barbaric actions natural to their character and disposition thus untimely submitting a subjective explanation for fundamentally socio-economic questions.

Similarly, while his portrayal of himself as a messiah sounds convincing in terms of propaganda to lift up the spirits of the oppressed and enhance the credibility of the liberation

movement, there are also disadvantages. Since the role of a messiah is divine and the chosen person is special, this places him in another world *vis-a-vis* the rest of the populace and his ritualised, sacrificial life renders the role unattractive to the majority of young people, thus the metaphor can frighten rather than entice them to leave their homes and go to the forest as they are not messiahs.

The speaker vows to cleanse his mother's hands, symbols of her suffering as a doubly exploited worker, with his own "boiling" blood, but amid this abundance of strength and promise of action, just when, "the rivulets that flow beneath [his] flesh along the bones of [his] body / boil / [and] the bubbles burst" (35), he is immediately confronted with his present powerlessness and he acquiesces:

the heat is trapped within me
 my gait sags
 my shoulders fall ...
 i feel weak like a feather. (35)

After the build-up of anger in the description of whites and the portrayal of his own emotional state, this is quite a disappointing turn but it is a necessary one (this is not to argue that it is intentional) since it is wise that the speaker realise his ineffectiveness when his emotions are very high so that he can, by example, show the primary audience proper way(s) of reacting to the situation and correct channelling of their emotions. Having come to terms with his weakness he turns to his mother for strength and, again, this is the political mother who represents the struggle for the country and the continent. The necessary contact with her, at this point, was through going to exile and political activism inside the country. Consequently, the speaker's "scream is folded, bundled and whirled into the / distant horizon near the river" (36).

The description of the river, "dark ... [hiding] its depth" (36) recalls the poet's metaphor

for the liberation movement in exile. The analogy between this river and the river of tears that tumbles down his cheeks, and, by implication, everyone who shares his situation, the speaker powerfully joins the exiled vanguard with the suffering people it stood for. The river's moods, its indestructibility and robustness, correspond to the patterns of the survival of the human spirits in the conditions of the speaker's context but more specifically captures the development of the liberation struggle. Consequently, he was "clayed", that is, he traces his origin to a period of the developments of the river's moods, "these hands clayed me in that moment / when the river flowed when the river ebbed / when the river burst" (36). This the context of apartheid and the intensification of the struggle.

As it gains strength and as its anger increases its water symbolically transform to flesh, the river is the people and the people are the river and at that crucial moment, the speaker's agony is "burnt" while "ecstasy / god turning away leaving his shadow prolonged in some / wretched room" (36). The speaker's radical political consciousness, evident in his waking up from ecstasy and religious passivity, his association with genuine initiatives for the eradication of the cause of misery and the bold announcement of his rebirth, are accompanied by an explicit drawing of a line between the oppressor and the oppressed not just as opposed camps but as enemies:

i emerge a wound in my gut
 using broken tongues and a bleeding heart
 kneeling on worn-out knees
 never in terms with peace
 frantic. (36)

Thus, the pain forces the speaker to fight, to resist, to struggle. He is compelled to use everything for that objective including language, religion and violence. This decision is presented as a natural, subjective reaction driven by a heroic, also desperate, determination to resist and undermine the law and order whose terms of peace seek to forcefully compel him to

ignore the logical demands and the logical conclusion of suffering under apartheid oppression. His rebirth is conceptually crowned with natural forces and metaphors which coincide with the river metaphor that dominates this phase; he is blown by wild wind when he emerges "to tide on [the] throbbing wound and flow into its rhythm" (36, my emphases).

Once the decision to stand up and fight against the specific oppressive system is made, it becomes easy to stress the universality of the fight against injustice as manifest in the generalising tone and attitude of the brief address to "this man, this, my brother" (37) which precedes his outright articulation of his political consciousness and declaration of confidence in his victory: "i am the man you will never defeat" (37) he repeatedly warns.

Presently, natural phenomena and forces which had been notable earlier for their insensitivity, hostility even complicity in the speaker's predicament significantly act in concert with his initiative:

i am the man you will never defeat
 my song will merge with the breeze ...
 and the moon will shine on my scream ...
 and one day
 when the sun rises
 the shadows will move, heaving like a tired chest
 there shall be millions of shadows
 heaving
 and the earth shall be cold
 and the river will freeze.
 and the plants will refuse to grow
 and the earth shall be dark
 and the river shall be dark
 and we will be alone. (37-38)

Thus, the oppressor is made aware of the power wielded by the oppressed which the latter has discovered and its potency is evident in their capability to mobilise and even command nature to their advantage.

However, just as the two adversaries face each other for a decisive showdown, just as

the time is ripe for the fighting out of the conflict leading to the defeat of the oppressor whereof we have been preparing and were being prepared, the flow of both language and logic is disrupted as the poet explicitly tries in vain to tone down or censor the radical implications of his utterances in the unconvincing declaration:

no man can defeat another man
 we can sing together
 make each other together
 we can eat together
 make the world together
 no man can defeat another man. (38)

While this clear anticlimax can be easily explained and brushed off as one of those unavoidable clichés typical in writers under repressive regimes, it nevertheless betrays [repressed] uncertainties regarding his decision and opens a loophole in the conclusion of the poet's analysis of the political scenario. It also illustrates the refusal of language to completely submit to the dictates of the writer's political objectives although this does not amount to the objective undermining of that political goal. From the oppressors, the speaker returns to his mother and announces his indebtedness to her for bearing and nurturing him while he also restates his rebirth as a warrior whose loins are "trapped in flames" (38). (According to the Cassell Concise English Dictionary, the loin represents strength and generative power.) The pun on "worrier" eloquently captures the ambivalence of the consequences of his decision as it refers to both the source of physical and emotional pain, but also pride for his biological mother as well as to the motherland or the nation. The speaker's recourse to action salvages him from the despicable situation of being an object to become a subject in charge of his destiny. Thus the painful memories of powerlessness in the face of international imperialism which manifests itself in the form of apartheid in his context are (rather vaguely) relegated to the past as he embarks on a new campaign which will insert him at the centre of history as an

agent, hence he can confidently declare, "the songs of this time, this moment, will drink from my soul" (39).

His awareness of his unjust marginalization and the prejudices against him, his experience, evoke a sense of being a "lost child",

named after all the curses of this world ...
shooed out ...
trapped ...
locked tight in the fury of man . (39)

This, in turn, awakens a longing for the mother's warmth, the affection and the happiness that he lost together with his childhood innocence. There is a clear awareness, implicit in the emphasis on the fact that these joyful memories belong to the vanity and simplicity of childhood, that it is neither possible nor desirable for them to be retrieved as a form of intervention in the context of the harsh realities of black experience.

From this early childhood, the speaker moves on to recollections of his adolescence in the "dark" township streets where, against his mother's regulations, he had searched for himself "in broken automobiles / growing" (40). The two options opened up by the street against the system are on the one hand criminality and gangsterism both of which have no political agenda and, on the other, the political movement(s) which clandestinely organise and mobilise resistance against the system. The latter is the protective mother of the victims of oppression to whom the metaphor of the mother and estrangement therefrom refer, the political mother(s) stationed in exile in the heart of mother Africa, the ANC and PAC. Political detachment or ignorance is thus equated to estrangement from the mother.

The activities of the underground movement are portrayed as a kind of sweet seduction, the objective of which is the establishment of "peace" for the speaker who has already acknowledged his restlessness:

i know you love
 i
 i have seen your eyes wink, wink wink
 and have felt your gentle hands search for my peace
 in this dark hour of my time
 for my life
 for this little droplet of your blood
 i have seen your eyes wink ...
 when your sight seized me so gently like a cat
 would bite its kittens
 from the many blind footsteps to the soft mat. (41)

For effective peace and a lasting security, the speaker knows that there needs to be a confrontation with the forces of apartheid and it is the consequent catastrophe of this conflict that the speaker anticipates as he implores his mother's inspiration for strength to withstand this disaster:

let me drink your love mama
 let it spill its warmth on my cold bosom
 so when the sun bursts into flames
 and the moon comes tumbling down
 and the stars shut their twinkle
 i
 i can remember the warmth of your love. (41)

As he envisions this looming bloody confrontation whose magnitude is stressed by the active intervention of the erstwhile passive physical elements, he is moved by the widespread suffering of the young and the old people around him. As he "touches" the fear of children and hears screams of the oppressed tearing the horizon, a suffering that nature once more condemns in the suggestive image of "the huge many trees [which] shake their heads" (41), he is overwhelmed by a great sense of responsibility as implicit in his assertion, "the vast sky is looking at me" (41). This awareness of the importance of his reaction to his role, the rejection, shelving or acceptance thereof, is interesting.

While he is pushed by a subjective emotional instinct, his love, it is not entirely subjective and absolutely romantic as he also needs the strength and the resilience symbolised by women. In South Africa, in particular, this strength of women, especially black women, which is evidence of their overwhelming love has been consciously transformed to active political engagement as manifest in the famous ANC Women's League's march to the union building in the fifties as well as other political interventions. It is this symbolic fullness of the mother's love, its transformability to political action, which inspires the speaker.

It is this comprehensive interpretation of love that he uses as a yardstick to measure his own love in return. Thus his commitment represents the practical application of this conception of love in his own life and its depth is highlighted by his willingness to pay with his life, armed with the belief that his "blood will nourish the tree of freedom":

soothe my wound let me love
 oh you black mother
 black woman
 mama
 your smile that paves through the wounds and the hurt
 breaks me
 like a twig loaded with green leaves and ripe fruit
 mama
 let me fall to this soil
 let my rest be a seed
 if i will take this fall
 gently, gently
 with my bare feet and my naked body. (42)

There is a confusion which stems from the poet's use of the word "unfathom" in the lines following this statement where the speaker either unmeasures (of which I feel he should rather measure) the "depths of [his] soul / to the sky / the sun / the stars and the moon / to the mountains / the trees / ... to this the earth" (42) or disembraces (also inappropriate) these "depths", that is, to shift them over to nature. On the other hand this sharing of the burden, the

pain, and the responsibility to self emancipation with the physical world is connected to the increasing activity and intervention of the erstwhile passive nature on the side of the oppressed which in turn is in line with the poet's mobilizing motives and strategies.

Once the speaker's emotions are worked to this heightened level where he publicly commits himself to freedom or death he dispenses with the civility and caution of too figurative a language:

i will take this fall gently ...
 my mama
 and with my clean fingers touch, just touch this deep love
 africa
 i am the tears that have dug your cheeks
 i am this your throbbing wound
 this
 the wound whose pain is taut in the air
 i am the rhythm that curls in the river and breaks in the sea
 i am the sea that curls and spirals and whirls
 whispering to the air
 its depth ...
 i am
 a thirst that can be quenched by freedom ...
 africa
 torn
 if i can take this step
 and move like a feather falling from a flying bird
 and reach the distance of this sky
 mama
 let me take off fear like i would my dirty clothes
 i look into your face my mama
 your face uncurls and wounds my heart
 i hear your voice
 hatred tightens its grip on my throat as i turn my back to go. (42-3)

The climax of this emotional build-up is the powerful eruption and acknowledgement of hatred which has hitherto been withheld as the speaker stressed compassion, "love", almost as his sole driving force although the experience of suffering he details provokes not only compassion, bitterness and anger but also hatred. Thus it is not only the love of freedom but

also the deep hatred for the *status quo* which ultimately drives him to action as the last sentence denotes. Implicit therefore in the speaker's turning his back "to go" is the journey to exile, the journey to Africa and the ANC, the two figurative mothers.

In the next subsection we are taken back to the speaker's memories of himself in the city "seated there / between the sky and the earth, watching electric stars" (43) where his interaction with people is implicit in the footsteps and questioning voices. This social interaction and the endless encounters with the speaking, "dappling", eyes of the suffering people around him which reflects his abominable condition of defeat, silence and inaction back to him. Fortunately, this observation and introspection does not lead him to indulge in self pity or despair but to the discovery of possibilities "past the eyes that began to pray" (44) which are symbolised (once more) by the mother's face, the embodiment of the people's suffering, their history and their resistance. Thus, from the mother's face can simultaneously flow "shades of the time past cold shadows of the disastrous hour" (44), while it flows "over rocks and sand and the reeds" (44) and floats "on the surface of the river" (44).

The association of the 'mother' symbol with the river initiated here is completed when both the form and the content of the river become one with the mother figure rendering the symbols interchangeable and mutually reinforcing one another. While the abundance of the mother's presence is recorded as such, the absence of the father is a disturbing concern for not only does it balance the active-mother / passive-father polarity opened by Serote's symbolism (as manifest in his other works including the first novel) but it also falsely purports to record the real absence of the father. The extent to which this platitude was prominent in BC thinking is evident in comments such as this one by Biko:

But the type of black we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks awe at the white power structure. ... In the privacy of his toilet his face twists in silent condemnation of white society but brightens up in sheepish obedience as he comes out hurrying in response to his master's

impatient call. (1978: 28)

In contrast to the mother's historicity or conception in linear, historical time, "the disastrous hour", the father is vainly sought in a seemingly static, "distant moment", where the speaker hears "something tear something break something smash" (44). Thus, in the swiftness of just one breath, as the absence of commas suggest, the passivity of the symbolic father is established and declared. It is, however, not treated with dismissive simplicity but smoothly interwoven into the complex symbolic structure of signification. Thus the active verbs which denote the resourcefulness of the mother, "flowing" and "floating", are replaced by passives, the most symbolic of which is "frozen".

From the outburst of energy explicitly promised by the witty river the vision takes us back to the world of suffering but this world is fixed to the passive end of the dialectic, the father. The most striking implication is the implicit transcendence of the rough past with recourse to action as promised by the symbolic energy of the river. This picture of sweeping suffering also forms the background or informs the underlying optimism which is betrayed by the implied transience of the world of oppression and suffering as it is transformed by the symbolic energy of the river which represents action and reclaims authority in the poem:

i looked past the frozen eyes
 my eyes flew past
 the crickets began to chirp and the frogs began to groan
 and the river hissed past my twinkling eyes
 the river was dark the river was deep the river was flowing. (44-5)

There is a notable growing mystique of hidden, but well-known potency surrounding the river image which is stressed throughout.

The speaker turns to the observation of his own personal situation in context as indicated by the present verb "is" which denotes his concern with the present. We are told of "an intricate canopy of nightmares" (45) which constitutes the speaker's mind, and the dreams

and prayers in which the speaker hides in search of solace against the misery (re)presented by the "dirty", "dusty" streets. It is on the streets that the political power and domination are publicly displayed and similarly contested. Consequently, it is out there on the streets that the speaker's defeat and alienation are boldly written - no wonder he feels helpless amid the cycle of entrapment represented by the labyrinth of the streets which:

... weave in and out of my mind to nowhere
 they vanish, these streets of my town, vanish
 and i have walked them all my life
 i wore my grandfather's life and my father's life and my life ...
 i have been in and out of these streets and back
 to nowhere in these streets. (45)

Similarly, it is the streets which reactivate memories of a painful childhood caused by poverty, memories which, coupled with present experience, anger him as implicit in the emotional tone of his words, "i will never forget what i cried for / these bloody streets can vanish to hell / i don't care" (45). The crucial feature of this return of perspective to the streets is the maturity of the speaker's vision as he notes the devastation of the people and their environment within the political context, as denoted in his open assertion:

these streets stink like apartheid
 these streets are traps
 hold my hand mother let's look at them
 these the squeaking blood-stained hungry-rat battlegrounds. (46)

The reality of the streets as the ultimate site of popular struggles hinted at in their conception as the "battleground" is reinforced by the image of roaming, trigger-happy cops and *lumpen* elements to which the speaker reacts with the intention of wrestling the majesty of the streets from these two reactionary forces. The sublunary essence of this battleground is highlighted in the obsession with defining it by its difference from and relation to the "mute" sky which represents otherworldliness. It is the touching evidence of the simplest material

consequences of oppression - the death of old women, of children, the moral disintegration of the society, the struggles for survival, for "bread", for "water", the thirst that "burn our throats" (46) - which drives and strengthens the speaker's resolve.

In an interesting premonition of the young students who were massacred in 1976 the speaker turns to the children at this crucial point of confrontation in the poem and observes what basically amounts to their ignorance of their vulnerability in the deadly political war for which they are perceived to be unprepared. Thus when they are "caught by the dark" (47) it is the women who conceived them who are left wailing in vain and in pain in the streets where the "children have been so broken / and the old look down to the earth, where the hole is made" (47). It is the virtue of faith which the speaker derives from the envisioned suffering and survival of these broken hearted women that fills the speaker with the increased determination to call for mobilisation and the intensification of the struggle: "let's mount our love on our wounds" (47). Symbolically, this 'wound mounting' highlights the necessary pain that comes with the cleansing and culminates in the river which is turned red by blood.

The predictability of catastrophe is implicit in the ironic starkness of the red river while "nobody wants to take a look" (47). Consequently, he defiantly asserts the birthright and identity denied him by apartheid hegemony culminating with the boldly repeated statement: "i am the son of this earth" (48). It is not only suffering, the tears, the sweat, the blood, etc., which confirm his oneness with the hostile environment but, most symbolically, also the physical material space itself, the mud, the dust, the rocks, the sky, the sea, the trees, the grass, and so on. Interestingly, we are returned to the "dirty dusty muddy street" (48) where the speaker initiates a symbolic severance of "this umbilical cord" (49) signalling the reality and immediacy of the option of exile in his situation.

It is distressing, however, that the deeply symbolic streets still "lead nowhere" when they have already been acknowledged to be important sites of both political conscientization

and the actual battleground in the war against apartheid domination. After paying a moving tribute to his mother's indispensable courage, the speaker insists on taking the next distance alone, that is, "motherless / fatherless / ... homeless" (49), but most significantly, in community with the people who inhabit or constitute the river in which he wilfully drowns himself and to whom he is tied by memory, by history. One aspect of the hidden power of the river is revealed to derive from the "not quiet silence" (50) of the people affected by suffering under the system, who constitute the symbolic river. The suffering that characterises the river transforms into a vision of death similar to the predictive vision noted earlier:

the deaths that emerged from a creation into a hole
 fell and formed little ripples on the surface of the river
 the deaths that came rushing like a mad train
 crushed
 smashed ...
 the corpses still stride the streets like scarecrows. (50)

The next section opens with an even more intense emotional commitment as depicted in the opening exclamation of grief "alas" (50) which backgrounds the authoritative command, "let me" in the following line where we are introduced to yet another level of the complex symbolism at work in the poem, the sea. As the mother of all rivers, the sea smoothly connects to the applied motifs hence, like the river symbol whose significance it expands, it is conceptualised as "this proud woman / a thing of mystery" (50-1).

After we encounter the sea symbol, the formerly covert resourcefulness of the river is explicit as it bursts with symbolic activity:

the river flows
 the river curls and turns and folds and bends and breaks ...
 the river whistles ...
 the river reaches out the river stretches
 groans
 whispers

the river breaks into screams echoes in the mountains. (51-2)

Once the speaker has surrendered his being to the resourceful community which is conscious of its political capacity, the individual, subjective "i" can no longer be sustained hence a confident collective "we" assumes authority and announces the maturity of a fully politicised community, a group which can declare, "enough is enough!" in one powerful, collective, voice:

if we see we have seen
 if we hear we have heard ...
 if we die and leave bones behind ...
 we've shut our eyes
 we've smashed the ears
 we've peeled the flesh. (52-3)

The emphasis on the universality of the sea and its subtle juxtaposition of its unlimited powers to the localised capacity of the river indicates the situation of the struggle against apartheid within an internationalist perspective.

The individual who is lost in the sea of the "eyes of people and voices of people / ... floating a million winks" (53), emerges not as an alienated but a communal being who can depend on the strengths of others as they do on his, and are thus able to drown his wound in the sea of their powerful collective. The practical security of communal consciousness which registers important lessons in his political development:

that tears don't help the wretched ...
 that man is a flesh worthy of a tender touch
 a touch of soft fingers ...
 that flowers are better than men. (53-4)

From the ultimate introspection which comes with this politicization emerges a

commitment to change the day. Transforming "today" to "yesterday" is influenced by the memory of precolonial Africa where despite the shortcomings in the social order, people enjoyed more freedoms. It is upon the deathbed of oppression that the free "new" day shall be founded and the speaker marvels at the prospect of partaking in the deliverance of that crucial, fatal blow and elated by the significance of the consequences:

i shall vanish
 and today shall be yesterday
 so when the moon is weary
 when the moon sheds its silver sweat on the western sky
 and seeks a soft spot to rest
 when its strength hangs out like the tongue of a tired dog
 my smile shall not make it shy
 when the twinkle of the stars is weary
 flaunting like a reed blown by a weary breeze
 when footsteps of shadows shall be heard
 following the moon to its resting place
 let my burning thirst for freedom
 be the huge moon's nest for rest
 when the moon sheds its silver sweat on the western blue sky
 my laughter will rumble on the distant horizon
 like my drums which have always wept. (54-5)

The triumphant laughter contrasts and replaces the weeping drums which are henceforth relegated to a past of despair and isolation:

when the river was dark
 and the river coiled its flow and hid its depth ...
 and the breeze had ceased to blow
 when the bird's whistle was mute ...
 and my voice hung in the air ...
 and the streets of this town led to nowhere ...
 and my tears rose and broke and fell
 when the rhythm of my red heart reared my life ...
 and my sorrow so deep
 and my despair ... deep . (55) [Emphasis mine]

The departure from that past to the present is marked by the symbolic vanishing of the

speaker's footsteps at the sea-shore where he awaits the birth of his day with other people. This contrasts with the image of footprints as "frozen rats" which is associated with the earlier times of despair and alienation mentioned a few lines earlier. The subsequent celebration of the cleansing powers of the water befits this new confidence.

Imbued with this immense courage, the speaker contemplates the possibility of his own death in the course of action and instead of awe, he accepts death with delight, proud of his historical context which fills the graveyard:

the tombstones
the gait of the graves ...
point a finger to where i come from. (56)

This is followed by an image of a scene after death where he narrates the story of his world of apartheid to the "unforgiving saints". He tells of a world of whites who speak of "our kaffirs" in reference to Africans whose fingers are "twisted" and "tongues cut" by white rule. In spite of that twisting and cutting, the people can "sing from the heart and gut" (56) and it is this flame of triumph kept by a community in distress which the young "watching" children will take forward and transform into the reality of freedom.

The speaker's repeated assurances implicit in the declaration, "i can say", denote the positive mood of the discovery of a subject position as suggested by the overlaid significance of the statement. From this self-assured, internal, vantage point, the speaker can discover the authority to console victims and make sense of suffering and death by contextualizing it. Having attained this overtly political maturity, the speaker is trailed by "rainbow-coloured tissue papers" (57) which naggingly remind him of the suffering of his people, hence he sarcastically declares, "these streets this town this land grows big kaffirs indeed" (57). Afterwards, the speaker recounts the joy and relief with which, together with other recruits, he welcomed the crowding at "the back of the truck like animals" (58) on the journey to exile.

It is the footsteps of the vicious cycle of the system which creates then devours its victims as the example of the child who is shot for stealing suggests which pursue the speaker to exile where he is welcomed by jovial voices at which point the footsteps of the persecutors fade. Here the real strength rests not in numbers but quality as implicit in the assertion, "here we come / one man a million men" (58). Now that he has reached exile, the speaker confronts the audience with a critical rhetorical question, "here we are now / who will listen" (59) before proceeding to surrender himself in full to the force of the sea which later becomes Africa:

let me seep into africa
 let this water
 this sea
 seep into me own me
 and break my face into its moods. (59)

He places his faith and fate in the hands of Africa noting the devastation and reigning havoc thus highlighting the legitimacy of his claim on the continent which culminates in the emotional closing statement, "ah / africa / is this not your child come home" (61). The frequency of the exclamations evokes an image of a panting, weary athlete at the completion of an epic race and coincides with the closing lines of the poem. The completion of the speaker's journey to radical political commitment is celebrated with yet another water image with the introduction of the "flood" which represents the ultimate point of no return. It is the passionate force of the flood, its invincibility and even its legitimate (read natural) destructiveness which serves as an inspiration to the speaker's war. Thus he can work and wait for that "one day" with confidence while the flower that is destroyed by the bright sun of this awaited day is the sick rose of apartheid.

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of the passivity of political apathy and the activity of political involvement with its concomitant binarism of enslavement and freedom which was started in the earlier poems is sustained and developed. Notably, particular groups of

metaphors such as the river, the sea, the wound, etc., begin to predominate. The use of repetition and parallelism is maximised as the need for coherence becomes more acute with the longer form. Images of the conditions of blacks under apartheid still predominate. Also notable is the enthusiasm and impressive assumption of the role of praise-singing for the struggle and the ANC ultimately. One aspect that is disconcerting is the confusing effect that result from the excessive use of the figurative language and repetition. At times the interchangeable use of metaphors, their cross-referencing, their acquisition of new meanings that are ambivalent and even contradictory, etc., effects their loss of effectiveness. The poem dramatically captures both the physical journey to exile and the political development of an individual.

CHAPTER 6TO EVERY BIRTH ITS BLOOD

The decisive contradictions in the novel are fundamentally ideological and political in origin. These contradictions are interlaced with the novel's stylistic and structural processes in a complex manner, but a manner which is definitely not outside the ambit of critical scrutiny. (Kelwyn Sole, 1990. "This Time Set Again": The Temporal and Political conceptions of Serote's To Every Birth Its Blood)

To Every Birth It's Blood displays several fundamental features and crucial aspects of Serote's literary and political development. It dramatically depicts the strengthening and consolidation of his symbols, myths, themes and beliefs. Within the post-Sharpeville context, the novel delineates his contemporary literary and political predicament and also foregrounds future tendencies and developments in Serote's literary (and political) career. The major subject of conflict and the most influential force in the literature at this point is the dynamics of the poet's change of allegiance from the Black Consciousness (BC) to the African National Congress (ANC). This was not an uncommon or isolated development in the ranks of BC activists during the period.

Since the reader encounters Tsi.Molope's life at the novel's beginning, *in medias res* as it were, the text also displays a critical engagement with the dynamics and contradictions of that *in medias res* quality in Serote himself as his suggestion of the ideal alternative is implicit in the treatment of Tsi. It is easy to note that at play in the novel and meted against each other, are the two major forces which have shaped Serote's literary, political and epistemological outlook, the Black Consciousness Movement with its Pan-Africanist leanings and the Congress Movement or the "Charterists" led by the African National Congress. By 1981 when the novel was published, the June 1976 student uprisings and the "Power" politics with which

they are rightly associated were already analysed in retrospect.

Black power was in decline and its influence receding in the face of historical and material forces without, including severe repression as well as contradictions within its ideology, structures and praxis. Subsequently, BC adherents were flooding the ranks of the "Charterist" Movement both inside the country and in exile. Many among them, Serote included, perceived the transition as a necessary and logical development. The importance of To Every Birth Its Blood as an account of this important historical epoch and its implications on both the subjective and the objective planes can not be understated nor the text's centrality in Serote's oeuvre. The novel displays both the dominant characteristics of the early and the later literature which are juxtaposed against each other for creative and political concerns. As the real life dynamics, contradictions and developments are fictionalised and unfolded in the spatial terrain of the novel, problems relating to both real life and fiction itself also surface.

It is fair to understand the resurgence of the prose genre within the context of the events of June 1976 and their implications which, not least due to sheer size, compelled a wider analytical space than that provided by the poetic form. We must also always keep in mind that the pseudo-historical novel of the "Power" era has a whole tradition of historico-realist literary tradition preceding and therefore also influencing it which can be traced back to Sol Plaatje's Mhudi and his generic successors, the likes of Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma. Thus, while Nick Visser's comment that, "Here at last, so the feeling went, was a novel by a black South African which - approached within the limits of the reigning critical framework - could stand alongside the work of Nadine Gordimer or J.M. Coetzee" (1987: 67) is enlightening about the reception, popular success and the crucial intervention of TEBIB the statement should also be seen as a relative observation. The interest roused by the novel among readers and critics is well documented by Visser who also pinpoints the source of such extraordinary reception as the text's "formal complexity" and adds, "for, just such stylistic and

structural complexity has been the principal aesthetic of twentieth-century poetics" (1987: 67).

In his paper, Visser applauds earlier commentators for discovering the stylistic complexities epitomised by the novel's dual structure as the "key" to the interpretation of the text. Helpful as their valuable insights are, these early critics, according to him, "do not carry their analyses of the complexities far enough; much of what goes on structurally in part 1 escapes them, and there are complications underlying the two-part structure which they fail to identify" (Ibid). Visser singles out Dorian Barboure in his sharp critique. Barboure's reading of the novel in "Mongane Serote: Humanist and Revolutionary" perceives and projects the two parts as balancing each other structurally and thematically. Visser views this as a frustrated attempt of orthodox criticism to impose artificial unity "to stabilize the structure of To Every Birth Its Blood" (Ibid, 68). Indeed the tone and implications of Barboure's praise of Serote's "humanism" and the overemphasis on his (mis)perceived "deep-rooted concern for individual happiness and wholeness" (1984: 180) which characterise her concluding remarks can be seen as an overt attempt at stabilizing the revolutionary aspect of Serote as implicit in the title of her paper.

Visser's critique of Barboure's approach unveils the limitations of hegemonizing orthodox critical approach(s) in whose discourse order, unity, harmony and other associated terms are sacrosanct. According to Visser, Barboure's assumption of unity is not only misleading but fails to take note of the conditions of the production of the text which are the source of the dual structure of the novel. He argues that, "Coming to terms with the structure of To Every Birth Its Blood requires a recognition that it is not one novel but two; or, ... it is the product of two fictional projects" (1990: 68). He also points out that the imposition of unity is a manifestation of Barboure's unwillingness, "to entertain the possibility of inconsistency or contradiction within the novel, she is able to come to terms with many of its difficulties only at the expense of falsifying some features and obscuring others" (Ibid).

Convincing in its proposition and articulate in its critique as it is, Visser's proposition is controversial and it further complicates issues. The overt intrusion and treatment of that fundamental and uninterrupted narrative - history - in To Every Birth Its Blood or any other text may be conscious or unconscious, mimetically consistent or inconsistent, but it can always be traced; therefore, as Visser himself admits, it is not peculiar to Serote's novel. To emphasise the separation of the two parts of the novel to an extent of arguing that it is in fact two clashing novels mystifies the already complicated formal issues. Granted, close analysis of the time montage or the temporal chronology of events and the temporal vantage point especially in part one reveals inconsistencies and contradictions in the entire text. Besides demanding too much from us, the readers, the suggestion of two novels seems to be caught in its own process of selection and obscuring because it nullifies the presentation of the work as one text, To Every Birth Its Blood. Since it is clear that there is a relationship between the two parts, to emphatically insist on the conflictual essence of this relationship seems invalid. What would such a reading make of the manifestation of same characters, similar or continuous preoccupations, themes, symbols, etc., which connect the two parts and render them parts of a single whole?

Furthermore, Visser himself acknowledges in his paper that his proposition can only be substantiated by recourse to the original manuscripts so as to ascertain his theory of two different fictional projects that constitute the text. Indeed one is compelled to concur with Kelwyn Sole's assertion:

Visser's points are both correct and themselves problematic. His own reading does appear to leave several issues either pending or not discussed. His conviction that features of structuration of the novel are of considerably less importance than what happens due to the clash of two incomplete fictional projects leaves a great number of not only formal but also ideological and thematic intricacies of To Every Birth Its Blood unexplored. His deconstruction of the text's irregularities of

composition is ... largely accurate: yet it potentially forecloses the necessity to further examine the text in order to discern the author's conscious use of stylistic and structural features. (1990: 3)

Seizing a strategic cue from Serote's recurring statements where he stresses the belief that the logical demands of the novel became convenient for the analysis of the "logical process of development" (New Nation, 1 - 7 December 1988), which in turn, we can justly assert, is based on the understanding of the logical development of the national struggle, Sole suggests a thorough scrutiny of the **logic** of this notion of logicity. What does the logical development of the national struggle(s) against oppression entail for Serote? What is the logical conclusion of this logical process? Where does he stand in relation to that logical perspective? These are some of the questions with which this study will implicitly grapple.

In his paper, Sole emphasises the critical relevance of the fact that Serote is both a poet and a prose writer and these genres feed into each other in his works. Following this logic one can add that since he is also a politician that aspect is definitely going to greatly affect his creative work, as is indeed the case. Sole points that critical activity has not been intense due to the notable operation of the dual narrative logic which runs throughout the text and which stems from the interplay of prose and poetry in it. According to Sole:

it would appear that the novel is into two different forms of logic - the one linear, realistic and analytic and the other imagistic, repetitive and intuitive. ... This is more than the mutual interference of two critical projects: ... the realistic and the metaphoric collapse into each other at every point, intertwined in a conceptual unity which is directly the terrain of Serote's own ideological idiosyncrasies. It is only through an exploration of this conceptual framework that the nature of the ideology, and subsequent problems of the novel, can be brought satisfactorily to view. (1990: 6 - 7)

This study shall endeavour to respond to the challenge sounded by Sole's statement.

When confronted with the novels of Soweto 1976 or indeed with the vast majority of

literary productions of the 1970's one is struck by the deep influence of Black Consciousness ideology in the literature as noticeable in the zeal displayed by most writers in their quest to be authentic to the philosophy. To the majority of the writers this unproblematically translates to the mimetic depiction of "black experience". While this is supposed to be a true reflection and analysis of the social dynamics and contradictions of life under oppression, in most instances the exercise recedes to uninquisitive reportorial.

Many critics have complained about this mishandling of the political theme in black writing but, in a peculiar way, Serote's novel tries to transcend these shortcomings. It is a narrative of events and their implications for individuals and collectives, both those who rise to the demanding challenge of participating in the making of their history and those who shy away from that responsibility. It is a story of a people trapped within the contradictions of a time (history) which is hostile to them and how they struggle to turn that tide to their advantage for their emancipation from oppression. Much as we must always be vigilant and sceptical of hegemonizing notions and tendencies due to their often covert allegiance to conservatism and its stated and unstated objectives, it seems that the key to a rigorous analysis of the text lies in the acceptance of this logic of a significant connection of its two parts in structural, thematic and symbolic terms.

Ironically, it is Visser who alerts us to one of the fundamental themes of the novel, its absent centre: the June 1976 uprisings. He asserts that although the direct depiction of the uprising itself is "suppressed within the textual lacuna of the shift from part 1 to part 2. ... June 1976 is clearly the fulcrum on which the novel rests" (1987: 68). June 1976 is a significant landmark in the history of modern South Africa and like its precedent, Sharpeville, it symbolically marks a vital episode which is a turning point in that history. Everything in To Every Birth Its Blood, as Visser notes, "is presented as leading up to and away from that seminal moment of the 'days of Power'" (Ibid).

The view that the narrative logic of the novel can be unveiled on the basis of an understanding of the two interweaving narrative logics, the poetic-symbolic and the realistic, must be taken seriously. Considering Serote's well known insistence on the extricable link between literature and politics, critical scrutiny can unearth crucial data for a better understanding of the dynamics of the text by probing the moral and literary implications of both narrative logics as well as their interaction.

Since the symbols used in the metaphoric narrative logic of the novel are also consistently used, not without contradictions and specific complexities, in Serote's poetic works, an approach which is based on the analysis of these logics will enhance their comprehension in the poetry. Thus, the novel offers a gateway to the whole oeuvre and hence the view that it can be taken to be the central work in the oeuvre. Several symbols and motifs are functionally employed throughout the novel and as Sole notes, they assume several, even contradictory, meanings as the novel unfolds and as the context within which they are used alters. Sole points at the problematic thus unleashed in his statement:

It is very difficult to see, for instance, how at various points in the same literary work the motif of a 'journey' can be used to refer to such differing incidents as sexual act, the trek towards liberation, the journey of an individual through life, the journey into political exile, the experience of being tortured and the music of Dollar Brand and still maintain overall coherence. (1990: 6)

It is clear that the 'journey' motif is overladen with meanings as the appropriateness of its application in Sole's examples indicates. However, the complaint about the lack of "overall coherence" is unclear as the understanding of the use of each changing motif should be dictated by the context of its use and then its relevance or irrelevance within that context investigated together with its handling or mishandling in relation to the themes and other critical issues. The complaint is also suspicious for its conservative inclination, for, rather, we

should celebrate the potential multiple readings opened up by such changes of meaning and not dismiss them as a "hindrance to any sense of final symbolic pertinence" (Ibid).

While this is neither an attempt to deny the problem of inconsistent and contradictory meanings of the symbols nor an apology therefor, it is an insistence on two related issues. Firstly we must make a distinction between major and supporting motifs. The latter are harnessed and mobilised to underpin the former which are closer to the authorial ideology which employs them. There is no reason to assume that this distinction precludes the potential interchangeability of the symbolic roles of motifs as critical emphasis alters, in this scheme. The second contention pertains to the nature and extent of these contradictions; we have to ascertain whether they go so far as to undercut each other especially in the macro sphere and, more crucially, if they disrupt the fundamental intentions of and betray the contradictions in the commanding authorial ideology.

A thorough scrutiny of the implications of metaphoric signification in literary works is indeed crucial and imperative to the proper understanding of works of art. This is enhanced in the case of a writer like Serote who is both a poet and a prose writer. As noted, To Every Birth Its Blood (1981) can be deciphered through rigorous analysis of the complex interplay of the double logics - the metaphoric and the realistic. To avoid the danger of generalising which seems to stem from the lack of focalized, rigorous treatment of the dominant motifs in the novel, I have chosen to focus on two juxtaposed symbols which are the most persistently pronounced and sustained central motifs, the home and the street. The exciting tension between these two symbols is highlighted in the very opening lines of the novel when Tsi observes:

So, when She and I walked into the house after we had been in the street so long, I knew that another time was coming when we would have to be in the street again. (1)

The modern home is the domain of the nuclear family and it is conspicuous for its association with both the subordination of women and its opposition to the public sphere of politics. Anthony Giddens traces the origin of the family household in its modern sense to the growth of capitalism. In Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction (1982) Giddens argues:

prior to the development of capitalism ... the family household was generally a productive unit. That is to say, production was carried on in the home or the land adjacent to it, and all family members, including children, made contributions to productive activity. The expansion of capitalist enterprise, even before the advent of large-scale industry, undermined this situation by incorporating family members separately into labour markets. The subsequent widespread separation of home from the workplace was the culmination of this process. (1982: 116)

Other significant results of the advent of the modern nuclear family are the decline of communal allegiances and the privatisation of the family home, as well as the promotion of the “association between women and domesticity” (Ibid, 121).

Home is a protective sanctuary for the individual against the corrupting and dangerous modern world. It is “the focus for procreation and upbringing of children” (Ibid, 115-116), a place where the individual is trained and armed with the skills of negotiating and surviving the negative impact of experience. This does not mean that domestic experience loses its character as experience but, since it is founded on current patriarchal, bourgeois relations of production, the socialization and education that commonly take place at home instil subservience and individualism in order to covertly compel individuals to acquiesce to the public, political rules. These are, in essence, biased in favour of the ruling classes and designed to perpetuate their hegemony.

As the episode of the extract illustrates, home is presented as a resting place where you have tea or beer and listen to jazz while your wife sweats it out over the hot stove, but it offers

only a temporary break because the street is always calling, especially in the nation states of the Third World. The theatre of this modern world is played out in the streets where the individual is exposed to experience.

The whole atmosphere that dominates Tsi's home in this particular episode, music for meditation (jazz), drinking, inaction, the nagging silence and weariness, all introduce us to the crucial theme of an individual in a social context. Tsi and his wife Lily belong to the community of Alexandra which, like other black communities in South Africa, is still recovering from the brutal repression of the Sharpeville days and his melancholic condition and the silence surrounding his home represent the lull of the Sharpeville aftermath.

The heavy silence which does not only threaten but disrupts stability in Tsi's home does not stem from usual domestic tensions only but also from the haunting spectre of "most things about this earth" as Tsi notes, "[which] want you to run, want to make you weary, want you to faint" (1). These "most things" to which he is referring are, most of all, the oppressive apartheid atmosphere which threatens him personally with arrest for his association with a theatre group (2) and his failure to pay a "permit". This is the environment which has caused the detention of Tsi's activist brother and chased sons and daughters to exile, as the early reference to Hugh Masekela' and Miriam Makeba's whereabouts imply. The name of Tsi's brother, 'Fix', by which he is consistently referred to throughout the novel, is symbolic when one juxtaposes the choices taken by both brothers in response to the demands of their socio-political situation.

The disruptive effect of the political situation on private affairs which results in individual dislocation and isolation from the society spares no one in the first part of the novel, although it can offer illusory brief moments of relief to some few who stay at home like the early Ramonos and the elder Molohe family. Isolation is also expressed with the metaphor of sexual impotence, notably in the case of Tsi (112), who narrates the greater part of the novel.

Sexual impotence is also implicit in Tsi's father who is very close to his daughter but detached from his wife. As this inadequacy is expressed in cyclic terms of defeat and hopelessness, there is an underlying desire to break this cycle as implicit in the counterposing of Tsi's despair with various alternatives of active social engagement in the search for the ultimate strategy suitable for the individual's response to the devastation around him which is responsible for his alienation.

The constant undermining of stability in the textual domestic plane culminates in social and moral decay as suggested in the predicament of the old man Zola who faces the humiliation of a fatherless grandchild and Ndo's violent outbursts. This situation is (in)directly caused by the system which impoverishes and represses the already dispossessed communities. Significantly, a striking picture of the failure and inability of the home to offer a safe haven or retreat from the social reality of oppression emerges. The most interesting question, however, is whether the home can become an active site of deliberate political conscientization of individuals which is relevant to and consistent to Serote's politics?

Indeed it would be uncritical to hold a static, homogenizing view of the roles of the black urban home and its fundamental constituency, the various classes of the family from the poorest of the oppressed, overcrowded blue-collar, unemployed, lumpen and homeless families to the better off middle-class and semi-propertied elites, as time effects change in the situation or context thereof and generations therein. Consequently, there can be no contention of the direct political conscientization that would, for instance, be characteristic of the homes of revolutionaries. In the text, however, the dominant atmosphere of silence, secrecy and fear in most domestic settings corresponds to the impotence and despair that characterises Tsi's alienation and anomie.

The secrecy surrounding references to the Movement in homes, even by the activists themselves, is conspicuous and while it corresponds to the atmosphere of underground

activism it also impacts negatively on political conscientization in the novel. In other words, it does not actively create room for political education in homes except as a loud silence or an absence. Thus, even the political education of Dikeledi is not explicitly directed by her politically active father until after she had had some association with the BC outside of her home base. The silence that haunts Tsi's home cannot be explained without grounding it to its context and thus discover its concomitant, the clear memory of colonial conquest and the humiliating experience of oppression as captured in Tsi's assertion, "In our silence, Lily and I became closer. No, it was not silence at all. It was a knowing" (27; my emphasis).

Tsi and Boykie's conversation on their way back from an assignment in the bantustan of Lebowa (not Transkei as Barboure mistakenly asserts) dramatises the eruption of the repressed political knowledge and the urgency of the political demands of the contemporary situation on black youths even before Tsi's narrative commences. (It should be obvious that even before 1975 the institution of homelands was already a reality in many ways therefore we must accept the bantustan episode as preceding that which begins the novel in the sequential chronology of the novel's events.) The response of Boykie, who represents the earliest alternative to Tsi's despair and arrest in cyclical defeat, to Tsi's question about the state of organised resistance highlights the development of the radical perspective and subtly undermines the authorial insinuation on widespread apathy:

We have to find other ways than the press. You see for now the Black Students Organization is not even dealing with people. No, the issue is still to get it straight to the settlers, to define what they have done, to draw the lines, and then make a move. ... What I am saying is that no matter what comes, or rather, who comes and professes to be with the people in fighting for our rights, they have to convince this whole nation that they have the power to do so. ... I am with the BSO right now, but I realise that is only a stage, a stage in our battle to reclaim a home for ourselves. (78-9)

What is highlighted in this statement is evidence of an anti-apartheid current which might not

be radical enough to count as an offensive but clearly conscious in political terms.

The allusion to the "press" can be understood as reference to the emphasis on the printed word or reliance on the depictions of the liberal media to raise political awareness among the oppressed which are both misdirected and ineffective political strategies as Boykie's criticism of the "BSO" earlier indicates:

Besides, I'm against all the fucking press statements BSO is issuing all the time. Don't you see this is a repeat performance? All the black political parties did that in the past, and now, what have they achieved? The Bantustans? Why do we keep on making the same mistakes, why?
(77)

It is notable that a student organisation is the only avenue for political engagement open to the youth in the Sharpeville aftermath, but is it accurate to present contemporary youth as the political vanguard and spokespersons of all the oppressed or as the primary social actors, not to mention making them the sole actors in that social struggle? What about the role of the upsurge of political trade unionism which resulted in widespread workers' struggles in Natal and the Eastern Cape resulting in the economic crises which many believe were fundamental in the resurgence of the political activities that culminated in the 1976 uprisings? Such concerns are heightened when even after many developments in the struggle have been recorded, when we have been informed about the open civil war and exile, the concluding chapter presents the fundamental source as the students' educational grievances around which the whole community of the oppressed is mobilised.

Significantly, it is students who initiate the wave of uprising, "The streets of South Africa's cities were again filled with two types of uniforms, both feared: camouflage dress and school uniforms. The parents of the children - domestic servants, street sweepers, bus drivers, gardeners, everyone - joined. The mineworkers joined the strike. ... The churches came out.

...[then] TERRORISTS ATTACK ON HEIDELBURG MILITARY BASE"" (360). The united front is impressive and inspiring, but the presentation of the students as its vanguard is both inaccurate and misleading.

Lodge's discussion of the theories of the 1976 uprising is illuminating and relevant to my argument. According to Lodge, the liberal South African journalist John Kane-Berman cites the influence of BC in the townships as "the single most important factor" in explaining the volatility of the townships (1983: 330). Berman's argument is challenged by exiled revolutionaries Baruch Hirson and Brickhill and Brooks. According to Lodge, Brickhill and Brooks claim that by 1974, "former political prisoners, stimulated perhaps by Portuguese decolonisation and the opening of South African borders to insurgents, had reformed ANC cells. Some of the SSRC [Soweto Students Representative Council] members interviewed in exile said they belonged to such cells" (Ibid, 331). Hirson's argument, according to Lodge, is towards denying the central role accorded to the BC in the analysis of the uprising. His argument is summarised by Lodge thus:

Overshadowing the significance of Black Consciousness in contributing to the ideological climate of rebellion, ... was the effect of the strikes of 1973 and 1974 which instilled a new feeling of self-confidence in the urban African community (which of course was augmented by the South African army's inability to defeat the MPLA in Angola during the summer of 1975-6). The strikes directly affected a much larger section of the population than any of the Black Consciousness organisations, helping to induce an appetite for resistance and confrontation. The continuation of the industrial strike movement into 1976 represented a lost historical opportunity. (Ibid, 331-332)

Thus the vanguardism accorded to the BC students is, to a large extent, a fabrication and an exaggeration.

Disruption of relations within the 'home' as the major cause of the public 'battle' is crucial to the political significance of this symbol as highlighted in the opening of the novel. Boykie's political definition of 'home' is key to a proper grasping of the political nature of the

symbolic home which is ambivalently presented as an unsustainable, yet also painfully sustainable, judging by Tsi's retreat into individual psyche when political responsibility calls, social institution. Tsi's lapse into the isolation and despair surrounding him after his return from Lesotho and his subsequent assault is caused by his choice of a private home when he is aware that the solution lies with a political home. Both Tsi and Boykie are at an exciting point of their lives after the assault. Here Serote dramatises the popular slogan, "submit or fight" and it is clear that Tsi submits to the pain of living in shame, isolation, humiliation, with a guilty conscience and surreptitiousness as does his father and many others in Part One in particular.

The home chosen by Tsi is both contradictory to and fundamentally interrelated with the one described and subsequently adopted by Boykie. It is a significant symptom of the whole attitude of despair that Tsi embodies that Tsi only recalls the words, "We have been beaten into submission" (79) from Boykie's powerful lecture. Implicitly, retreat into individual psyche is not wrong as long as it facilitates social consciousness as is the case with the erstwhile passive characters in Part One who emerge from that passivity to become active combatants of the Movement in part two. However, in Tsi's case it is a means of permanent escape from social realities.

Serote's emphasis on the individual will as a precedent to political commitment and the accompanying presentation of individuals as generators of political action is implicit in Boykie's comment: "A few well organized people have to challenge the power of the settlers, while the people watch, and if you convince the people that you know what you are doing, they in turn will lead the revolution" (78-9). Coupled with the prominence of small cells of Movement combatants, the reiteration of Boykie's words by Oupa in the second section (249) seems to strengthen Visser's identification of, "Serote's critique of mass political action in favour of small activist cells" (73). In essence, rather than just a "critique", this articulates the actual modus operandi of the armed struggle.

The private home to which Tsi escapes is dominated by silence and despair and Tsi's father, Molope, is the ruling patriarch. The presentation of the father-figure in uncompromisingly unsympathetic discourse also recalls the similar treatment of this patriarch motif in the poetry. In both genres, he is urbanised, defeated, tired, hostile and suspicious of his son, silent, attached to his daughter, but also mercilessly unleashes his anger and frustration on her. His bowed head in public signifies his fear of white power and he has a vain, romantic notion of both politics and tradition. He relies on his ritualistic (mis)reading of the newspapers for his unintelligible political opinions which he likes to throw at everyone's face in his household, especially to his rebel son, and he doesn't expect his flimsy political opinions to be contested or disproved. He loves the youngest children who do not challenge or threaten his authority (yet). He is the provider and the household head who knows that the streetwise, mature, rebel son, his wife, and the whole community know that he cannot hold his head high and look people straight into the eyes because he is defeated, humiliated and afraid of the system whose power has tamed him to meek servitude, religious escapism and turned him into a domestic despot.

In spite of the tension between him and his father, the narrating son sometimes depicts ambivalent sentiments and attitudes towards the patriarch as he is both part of him and shares fundamental, critical features with him. Nevertheless, the father is commonly depicted in a predominantly negative, dismissive language and more than the other people around, who are also criticised from time to time in the implicit assumption of the style and role of the traditional Imbongi. More than other characters in the early works up to To Every Birth Its Blood (1981), he is mercilessly blamed for failure to act decisively to ease the socio-political situation.

As early as in Yakhal'inkomo (1972), the son's desire to separate himself and reject the father is emphatically clear as illustrated in the following extracts:

I'm learning to pronounce this 'Shit' well ...
 The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg,
 So I said, hard and with all my might, 'Shit!'
 I felt a little better;
 But what's good, is, I said it in his face,
 A thing my father wouldn't dare do. (16);

Night, black night of home,
 That falls gently like sweet music of a horn,
 At home ...
 You let fall mean shadows of cruel secrets ...
 Frightened little fathers whose eyes never leave the ground. (51)

In Tsetlo (1974) he begins to acquire a comic outlook which degrades and ridicules him further:

My father looks like a mickey mouse
 walking
 drawn by a very cruel cartoonist
 to have lived in his time. (52)

It is in No Baby Must Weep (1975), however, that a more rounded depiction that closely parallels and prefigures that of the novel is formed; here, the poet laments:

he talks to my little sister as if they are a little boy and girl
 is that the only way to show tenderness
 he's funny
 i love him though ...
 he built the roof where we stay
 he made me and made brothers for me
 he made you my mother
 i love him
 i know i used to walk behind him like little lambs do
 as they follow the older ones in the veld to drink and to eat
 but if you follow the tracks
 when my footprints got larger they made their own paths. (12)

In Behold Mama Flowers (1978) the ambiguity is dropped and he degenerates into a pathetic character who is an embodiment of defeat, reaction, escapism and impotence:

when i heard an old man
 his weeping breaking down walls and steel
 trying to fight insanity
 which kept stalking and stalking
 and finally taking away his sanity
 while he was alone in a cell
 and when the door opened
 he dashed like a rat chased by a cat
 his sanity dangling from his small finger
 and he was pinned down
 was it not the same old man
 who now waded through torn streets
 and houses which echoed like empty shells
 after the bulldozer had been there before him. (17)

This combination of pathetic and comic depiction is transplanted into the characterization of Molope in To Every Birth Its Blood (1981). According to Tsi, he is a "short man. Muscular. He has a round face and a protruding forehead" (61), he wears "small, round, brown spectacles [which cling] round his fat face, like a frightened child, clinging to its mother, afraid to fall and hit the floor" (60). In an illuminating description that captures the ambiguous tension and the passivity wherefore the patriarch is blamed and which also surrounds this private home, Tsi narrates:

My father seemed never to know anything about us. He had long given up. He depended on what my mother said and for him that was enough. My old man. He seemed easy. He seemed adamant. He seemed to know what he was doing. [Yet he did not.] Sitting there reading his newspaper, and looking at us, above his strange, twisted glasses, in his silence. I began to suspect that my father felt threatened by our presence. ... As we moved in and out of the house, I could feel him watching, ready to bark. His silence now and then terrified me. I wondered how one could be so silent. When we came home, all of us, and were crowding our mother, talking and talking, sometimes fighting, he would move, go to his room and be there alone. His years had gone, my mother would say. He built a house for us. He fought, with his hands, mind, eyes, ears, feet, he fought to make a future for us. Which future? My mother never answered that question. She always walked away. I wondered what my father would say if once I dared to ask him what future he had built for us. I wonder what he would say. Fix's future? Ndo's future? My future? (58)

This complicated, persistent scapegoating of the patriarch of the isolated private home to which Tsi retreats against Boykie's explicit advice, is crucial for our understanding of the symbolic significance of Tsi's inertia as well as the home and the street as macro-motifs.

Molope is presented as a representative of a section of the old guard who had, under the influence of their experience of the ruthless might of the apartheid government, decided to isolate themselves from any political activity directed against the state. He is simultaneously an embodiment of black middle class, as his lifestyle suggest - wearing spectacles and always reading newspapers, wearing suits to church - and marginalised therein due to his pathetic isolation, silence and passivity. Other men (and women of course, though this is notably underrepresented) who wear glasses and live like Molope have, unlike him, ventured out of the house to which like a hermit he has withdrawn himself into the street where hondo, the war cry, calls. Indeed Zola's description of him as a 'good' man would be more appropriate if we substituted 'man' with 'boy' and thus mimic the discourse of the masters or, in the language of the poet, with 'man-child'.

Zola's own political record is impressive and significantly he is the only old person who walks the streets with Tsi although his political insight is ironically limited and incoherent. Therefore the attitude displayed by Tsi is triggered by Molope's apathy and his consequent failure as a role-model. Even though Zola and Ramono serve to relegate Molope as a representative of a minor section of the black middle class in accordance with authorial designs, the ideo-political shortcomings and contradictions of the class as a whole are neither lessened nor mitigated.

One of the most conspicuous and most illuminating features of Molope's is his staunch Christianity. This facet opens up the stage for the conflict between father and son and inaugurates the fundamentals of the tension between the home and the streets as powerful signifiers in real and symbolic terms. Tsi's visit to his parents' house after the terrible ordeal at

the hands of the police which significantly begins in the street crucially explicates this tension and dramatically captures some of the most important themes of the novel. Unlike Boykie who is pushed to the limit and moved to action by the police assault, to Tsi the experience seems to be the ultimate confirmation of his helplessness and he is chained to and by this belief throughout the novel. After he himself acknowledges his terror at his "aloneness, among the many, many people" who fill the street and some of whom wave at him while he "merely nodded, feeling betrayed" (97), his mother rebukes him thus; "Go to hell, you always think you live alone in this world, other people are concerned about you, ... Rubbish, a thing without a sense or manners, all you know is run after girls, and run in the street like a dog (97-8). In this she recalls Lily (50) and other characters who wrongly perceive Tsi's egocentrism as stupidity.

To his father it is a manifestation of the paganism, the lawless, immorality of the streets, which disrupts and erases the law and order represented by the home. This is clear in his reprimand to Tsi., "If you are a pagan be a pagan in the streets where you live not here in this house" (105). To Molohe, the streets stand as a constant reminder of the challenge to and defiance of the natural law embodied by the nuclear family and this law, as we know, naturalises patriarchal forms domination. The danger of an uncritical acceptance of Western religion is highlighted in Molohe's simplistically myopic political vision as explained by Tsi:

Yes, I could understand how it came about that everytime he talked about Kaunda, Nyerere, Nkrumah, he became irrational, he became like a small boy, talking about heroes in the movie he had seen. I understood now, as he sat there, that he could not afford to see any faults with his heroes, he had to believe that they loved him and were going to build Africa for him, that they were almost like God. ... He had to believe that one day, his heroes, his supermen, were going to fly into South Africa and seize it out of the terrible grip that now held it. ... They were the ones who would punish the white man, why did I not see that? Education had fucked my mind up, he would say. His heroes were old men like him, who knew the law, who had respect, who were not like me, reading what white people said and believing it, and then walking

the streets at night, hardly having time for God, cursing him for creating day and night instead of a long, endless day. 'You shame us, you young people' [he] would say. (103 - 4)

The tension between home and the street is also foregrounded in Tsi' observation of his reclusive sister:

Somehow, I felt there was something unreal about her. I feared for her, the day she found out what the street had for her. The streets in which her mother would not be, with her biting tongue, to tell her that she would be climbed, made to take journeys into the centre of the sea, and be left there, to be mocked while she was fighting the current. On the other hand, she seemed to sense it, and as a result, she kept in the house, in her room, reading her stupid books and washing several times a day, and singing to the radio. (100)

In short, the street removes the unction smeared by the law of the home on social contradiction and conflict. It is also significant to note that this law of the patriarchal family runs concurrent with rather than counter to the objective law of patriarchal capitalism and its socio-political institutions.

The only important activity perpetuated in Molohe's and other homes is the subordination of women and the feminization of the domestic sphere and this crucially exposes the lack of authorial intervention on this issue of great significance. Women are charged with looking after the welfare of the ruling patriarch as demonstrated in the Molohe household. Even in those homes where political consciousness should mediate the oppression of women we are disappointingly confronted with the unquestioned reign of the patriarch as in the Ramono household. This is another shortcoming of nationalist consciousness because it postpones issues pertaining to the liberation of women to the post-independence era. It is more alarming when a trend is discernible where the poetic-symbolic language does not only uncritically reflect the subordination of women but participates in that oppression by reinscribing its terms of reference whereby the feminine is associated with the sensational and

the irrational as opposed to the masculine which is associated with rationality as implicit in the pervasive animal imagery (e.g. 255, 288, 340) to which Serote's depiction of women capitulates. For instance, the tension in Ramono and Grace's bed stems from the fact that "when he wanted to read, she wanted to talk" (217) and when he spends days and nights dreaming about being near the oasis she "knew this. ... She was always ready to help, to pack his suitcases and to unpack them. ... She, in turn, was dreaming about him and about his oasis" (221; my emphasis).

This negative portrayal is augmented and more explicit in the portrayal of "shebeen queens". What we get is a persistent demonisation of these women and their lives without an exploration of the complexity of their situation in time and space. Although Aunt Mirriam is friendly and hospitable, and Joyce assists the revolutionaries in the assassination of the feared local policeman, Mpando, the overall picture is limited and reasserts stereotypes about them as a group. Thus, the last shebeen queen, Hilda of Gaborone, becomes a "nauseating" (355) prostitute. We need a knowledge which understands and commits itself to Boykie's advice, "Baby, soon as you find out something is a prejudice, fuck it out of your system, f-u-c-k i-t o-u-t!" (75).

Like Molohe, the old man Zola, whose gaze is fixed on the younger generation represented by Tsi with disgust and contempt at their moral decadence and who mourns the days gone by with nostalgia as if they were better, is both weary and lacking in progressive political insight. This deficiency of political analysis is foregrounded in Zola's attitude to the late Nkabinde and his conceptualization of the significance of Alexandra which contradicts Tsi's perception. It is crucial that Tsi's perceptions contradict Zola on the latter but not on his characterization of Nkabinde as a "good man", a quality he also curiously bestows on Molohe because they drank their brandy together, talked for long periods and went "away to sleep" (14).

In spite of his political involvement, Zola's limited, even reactionary, insight into the complex political issues is simplistic as manifest in his conversation with Tsi:

'You see that tall tombstone?'... 'Nkabinde is resting there.' ...'You know Nkabinde? He used to own a shop near Eighth Avenue. He died last year, they say he had lungs or something. He had a big funeral. Yes, he was a good man, a man of the people. ... I never used to understand why he said we should buy properties from the old ladies and from anyone else who wants to sell. You know I used to think he was greedy, but no, he had a head. If we did that, that time, these Boers would not have taken our place so easily, like they have. Look at that!' He pointed with his stick towards Alexandra. For some reason or other, every time I looked at Alexandra from the graveyard, it looked like a graveyard. 'Every time I look at all that, my heart bleeds. It breaks. We worked very hard to build this place.' (13; my emphasis)

The uncritical acceptance of the *bona fides* of the emerging parasitic, propertied black elite is designed to artificially cement class distinctions within the black community and to entrench their conceptualization as the vanguard of popular forces against oppression. Consequently, Nkabinde's greed ceases to be what it is but is presented as a pseudo-political strategy although he accumulates properties of fellow blacks who had been ejected from the propertied class by the pressures of apartheid and capitalism.

This attitude is taken further in the presentation of Michael Ramono, the other Alexandra landlord whose thirteen tenants paid him rent while, "He, in turn, paid into the bag held by a white hand, a bag which was as insatiable as a stomach" (219). The impression created is that only a white person can be greedy and exploitative, that if a black person joins the ranks of the wealthy whites due to his or her material accumulation, all's well. Coupled with the static depiction and consistent confinement of people within racial categories as in the case of David and Anna, this influence of negritude disarms deeper social analysis. The depiction of chief Lerato, the Lebowa bantustan puppet, as a stupid, ignorant man reinforces this concern as it shifts the responsibility for his actions to the white oppressors entirely.

In her book, To Lay These Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing (1992), Brenda

Cooper observes the revival of negritude in recent African literature. While she acknowledges that this results from a genuine desire to identify the "other" (them) as distinct from "self" (us) and also to counter the racist discourse of the coloniser as was the objective of early negritude, she insists that "recourse to false biological-type explanations, in the style of the very racism being rejected, distorts rather than clarifies a situation which is already murky" (38). Also culpable in this distortion, she points out, is the nationalist tradition with its emphasis on black unity and underdevelopment theory. Cooper explains the interwoven relationship of these notions and exposes their effect thus:

Dependency theory, ... combining in literature with post-independence Negritude will tend to produce the now somewhat outdated racial distinction between white coloniser and black colonised. No complex class analysis can emerge when this distinction is qualified only by depictions of limp, powerless black puppets and watchdogs, or even not qualified at all when the suggestion is that black exploiters are not black at all - they are 'black white men'. (1992: 39)

The solution according to Cooper's proposition is the adoption of 'racial' as distinct from 'ethnic' consciousness which she explains thus:

writers and fictions displaying degrees of racial consciousness will be perceived as more enlightened, more truthful, than those exhibiting ethnicity. ...The term 'racial consciousness' refers to an understanding of the powerful reality of racial oppression. Writers with a racial consciousness engage in struggles against racism, not least of all the psychological struggle against the internalisation by the colonised of the inferiority complexes. At the same time, racially conscious writers conceptualise this oppression in historical terms rather than essentialist, static, biological or generic ones. Because of this historical emphasis, racially conscious writing is capable of recognising divisions that cut across race - it is alert to the exploitativeness of the ruling classes. Finally, its historical complexity prevents it from confusing means and ends. (Ibid: 33)

Awareness of this difference alone, however, does not guarantee that essential insight to the complexity of reality, of "truth in the round" as Cooper argues, but, "Writers need to translate

this social and historical consciousness into fictional language and fictional content" (Ibid: 34). The handling of the intricate interconnection between race and class as social determinants in African literature which comes out of a context saturated with the potentially distorting ambiguities and contradictions of nationalism and liberation rhetoric on one level as well as negritude on the other is a crucial area of analysis.

The deliberate juxtaposition of the street motif against the private home is persistent and articulate but not without complications. It is in the street where throughout the novel (and in real life) we encounter crowds of people. The reclusiveness of the opening episode of the novel is immediately contrasted with the crowdedness of the Alexandra streets into which Tsi walks. This is the busy domain of "sounds of buses, cars, scooters, footsteps, playing children" (5), of, most crucially, the crowds. Significantly, these crowds are conceptualised in the image of a river, an image that reverberates with political meanings particularly in the middle parts of the oeuvre thus giving emphasis to the political as opposed to non-political crowds. Tsi describes the crowds he never walks "with" but always "into" thus:

I turned up Hofmeyr Street, into Sixth Avenue. I walked into crowds flooding from the terminus people, many people stopping now and then to talk to one another, and moving on. I went up Selborne Street. The river was in flood; footsteps, eyes, flesh flowing down. I walked into it. (6)

The street however, is also home to the vicious kings of darkness who rule the streets at night, robbing, murdering, raping, maiming and committing other hideous crimes against their own communities. These are the vicious criminals and gangsters, the lost brothers to whom the "Ofay-Watcher" who depicts scenes of township experience in the early poems pleadingly addresses himself. Soon as the cover of darkness descends, the darkest corners of the streets are scenes of criminal violence as shown in the senseless murder witnessed by Tsi and Moipone (7). Darkness is another common feature of Serote's symbolism and it is

contrasted to light, in line with either Biblical symbolism or its signification in negritude. Like the journey motif and others generally and in varying degrees, it alters its meaning as contextual application changes such that as darkness is increasingly advantageous to the covert operations against the regime, that is, as its negative aspect is consciously turned to utility, its terms of signification alter.

This violent dark side of the streets is the site of the senseless unleashing of the frustration caused by the system on black youth. It is only when the macro system is seriously challenged that this misdirected anger is temporarily redirected to revolutionary utility as John observes of the "power" days in his conversation with Oupa:

You know what still sprites me is that even the boys joined in. It was safe to walk the streets then, no one got killed by the boys in the street, no one was robbed; the police were the most dangerous people out there in the streets, you know? (193)

There are many characters in the novel who are claimed by this wrong side of the streets which represent a form of alienation caused by similar circumstances to those that implant the alienation that characterises the atmosphere of the home. Among these, the shining examples are the knife wielding pre-Lesotho Tsi, Morolong the son of Ramono and Georgy who owns the streets of Alexandra "against the will of the policemen", whose name 'Georgy':

was no longer just a name you could spell like that, because that was not what it meant. Yet such things together with what everyone gathered from Hollywood films and all the original intentions and unintended consequences which had made Alexandra, and a hundred and one gruesome murders, such things meant Georgy. (295)

Morolong's descent into the dark side of the street offers an interesting comparison to Tsi's character development by which the explanation of the author's explicitly displayed

causal insight into the nature of this kind of social behaviour can be investigated. Among numerous similarities between these characters we can mention two: they are both from stable, decent urban black middle class homes and they are claimed by the wrong side of the streets. The fundamental difference between them is that unlike Morolong, Tsi is saved in time due to his stay in Lesotho where he went to school while Morolong's demise seems to be ensured and accelerated by his rejection of education. He struggled and struggled through primary school until his nightmare became a reality when his younger sister, Dikeledi, caught up with him, then:

one morning when everyone expected him to emerge from his room clad in school uniform, he emerged wearing his long blue Sunday trousers, his hands deep in his pockets his eyes gracing the floor. That was the last time he thought about school. His parents and teachers had done all they could to lure him, to pull him, to push him back to the classroom, but Morolong stuck to the street, tight as a bug sucking blood. (209)

Soon after, Ramono's "quiet" son becomes a street gambler and "the flesh of his stomach got used to the blade that stuck there, hidden, covered by the clothes" (210).

In a development which seems to be an attempt to move away from the streets of crime towards the labour market, Morolong announces one day that he is going to work, then "it came out that he was a caddie" (210). Instead of delivering the hope of reconciliation it promises, this last act intensifies the conflict to a point of irreconcilability and indeed it seems that it (the act) becomes the cardinal sin which results in his banishment from his home and his final undoing. Morolong tries to escape this hard urban life by going to Walmanstadt, a rural area where his uncle Russia lives in poverty. Here, "He ate, drank, and sat in the sun, or listened to his uncle's sad stories, and buried his terrified heart deep in his chest" (226). He later realizes that the village is no safe haven and he returns to the city. The last mention of Morolong is when the narrator informs us that his mother, Grace:

knew ... that Morolong had slipped, had fallen, was down below the bottom of Alexandra. ... Now the only contact she had with him was through seeing his two sons, by one mother, and his little girl by another. No one knew where he was. At first secretly, then openly before and after Michael was arrested, she had started to look for her boy; in jails, morgues, hospitals, at all the garbage places of South Africa. (241-2)

Morolong is largely presented as a rebel son, fallen because he ignored his parents's teachings and trespassed his father's (natural) law; therefore he deserves his terrible downfall. If we compare him to Tsi, who also rebels, trespasses and openly defies his father's authority but escapes similar repercussions it becomes clear that Morolong's greatest mistake is his choice to leave school. This choice and the subsequently expressed desire to join the ranks of the lower stratum of the black population, the workers, means that unlike Tsi, he cannot fit into the class occupied by his family and because he does not aspire to join these ranks he cannot succeed otherwise he would annul the dictum that the only way for the African to find "a way out of the dry sands to the oasis" (220) is through education. In fact there is a zealous over-estimation and emphasis on formal education to such an extent that it is no mere coincidence that the vast majority of the major characters are active because they are educated. This becomes alarming when this formal education is uncritically equated to intelligence itself as apparent, for instance, in this authorial observation; "John felt illiterate, naive, and stupid, thinking all these things" (186).

Tsi's sister, Mary, whose silence echoes that of Morolong, suffers a similar expulsion from home and she also has a covert air of stupidity built around her and one would argue that her marginalisation is not unrelated to the fact that her path led to domestic servitude. The origin of the tragedy that befalls individuals like Morolong and Mary is social and subjective explanations like the simple assertion that, " There are people like that. People who it seems had so much strength, they can go on their own, isolated, taking the storm and surviving it"

(194) fail to reveal this essence and to capture the complexity. This arbitrary and misleading application of subjective choice is also pervasively conspicuous in the treatment of political commitment as an essentially entirely subjective decision. Stereotypes, contradictions and prejudice abound in Serote's ambiguous treatment of blacks, workers and the poor thus exposing some flaws in his social analysis.

Instead of moving to the other side of the street, the political section where the home Boykie spoke about can be attained, Tsi makes a wrong choice and goes to the shebeen where he hopes to drown his miseries in liquor and escape the harsh realities of life in his "drunken escapism" (345), as he acknowledges later. The part of the street where he lands is crowded with people and as he notes, he had never walked with the crowds but walks into them (5). These crowds according to Tsi are suffering from the same isolation, despair and melancholy which characterise him. Amid the buzzing noise of the street crowds which he likens to a bubbling stew (29) and the spark of hope he observes in the eyes of progressive people like Boykie, Tsi observes a despair and loneliness which matches his as displayed in his observation of a typical crowd in London Street:

I saw many pregnant women walking into the clinic. School children. Police. I heard the machines running at the firms across the street. ... Police. Men in overalls. Women in overalls. Familiar faces. Familiar sounds of machines, roaring, screaming, howling. People singing. Screaming. Yet, amid all that too, there was silence. I walked on and already, out of familiarity, I could pick up the people who were going where I was going. (56, my emphasis)

The crowds that flock, or rather flood, these streets of Alexandra, the noise, the dust roused by their footsteps and cars, "The smell of dirty water in the streets - the water, full of shit and all imaginable rubbish" (32) symbolise the general dehumanisation that combines the oppressed blacks and tactically cloaks the internal contradictions within that group in the true fashion of Third World nationalist discourse. This powerful, gripping decay imagery is what

leads other characters to "walk with the crowds" and join their struggles against oppression instead of wishing, like Tsi, to "get sick in the street" deluded that "Maybe [he] would feel better. ... [or] feel relieved" (Ibid). However, the metaphor of decay is useful like any other negative only to the point that it does not unintentionally reinforce stereotypes especially about the victims of racism and sexism.

The despair, silence and impotence which Tsi reads all around him and particularly among the crowds cannot be taken at face value. It must be understood as an attempt by Tsi to universalise his pathetic cowardice even though it is based on a questionable belief in the actual dominance of the mood of apathy at that point in history. Because of his resignation to his defeat, Tsi transforms and recreates the world around him in his image; he looks around him, sees the activity, the endeavours of people like Fix, Nomsisi, Boykie, Zola and others and, aware of his tough responsibility, he escapes to irresponsible drunkenness and then he vainly tries to convince us that his subjective passivity is archetypal. Whenever Tsi steps into the noisy crowded streets of Alexandra, he carries with him the silence, despair and the lonesomeness of his home.

Tsi succumbs and drowns under the weight of the "most things about this earth" which he mentions in the first paragraph of the novel. Against all the expectations roused by his early awareness of the situation and the proper response to it, he runs, he becomes weary, he faints. Only three pages after Tsi's narration of his grandmother's command that he has to make his journey "with and among other people" (88), he walks away from the crowds, "into the street to the shebeen" (92). Tsi's passivity reaches its climax when we meet him in exile in Gaborone.

After the emotive, politically charged speech he delivers to the policemen who were interrogating him, not to mention the awareness he has been displaying all along, one would expect a transformation of that consciousness into political commitment but this does not

happen. We meet the old, defeated drunkard in the streets of Gaborone, isolated from the fighters against oppression. The lesson is that Tsi's consciousness of the social roots of his predicament is useless if it is not accompanied by actual political commitment that leads to action. Indeed his earlier introspective observation of himself, "I fear this feeling. Lost. Big man I am. Lost. ... Yet here I was, lost in the streets" (45), fully describes Tsi even in exile. In exile, the ultimate, logical conclusion of his subjectivity, his silence and alienation from the material world of oppression and revolution around him is expounded as death in this illuminating passage:

Now it seemed that no matter what I did, or where I went, I would be a stranger, a stranger everywhere and forever. I was done with Alexandra now, that I knew. I was done with it forever, and I had known this long, long before I left. Then, everything had become deadly. Every step, every word, every friend I made, any street I walked, every minute, made me understand death. Death ceased to be the large thing, the elusive thing which I had grappled with, which had frightened me, which had made me wonder why -- if death was so powerful, so loud, so endless, so final -- why life then? I understood death because everywhere there was no life. Then who was I, if I had rejected -- assuming that I could -- life and death? I had seen so many eyes flicker and glitter with life, as if these eyes knew something about hope. Did they know something about how they could pay so hard, ... [about] finding out how they could search and destroy ignorance, how they could learn to hold the hands of those they loved, how they could handle hatred? Yet their eyes began to glimmer. (349)

The 'them' - 'I' dichotomy in Tsi's discourse significantly points to his divorce from the community.

It is only when we discard the simplistic perception of the post-Sharpeville lull and thus treat Tsi's conceptualization of the apolitical, passive masses with the distrust it deserves that we can get a clear glimpse of the intensification of conflict as an uninterrupted historical process not a spontaneous irruption of events. This understanding illuminates the significance of the street as a symbolic (and actual) site where the containment attempted by the patriarchal

home in a patriarchal capitalist setting is exploded. Like the home to which it is dialectically counterposed, the street is a deeply symbolic metaphor as it signifies colonial and capital advances in the history of Third World nations in particular. It is on the streets that the true journey to commitment can be made and it is on these same streets that radical militancy can be displayed.

From the onset, the street is not just a point where the flux of social interaction between collectives, individuals, material circumstances, economic and political interests, ideologies, all bubbling in the stew of history, are manifest, but it is the crucial area of contest and confrontation between the forces of domination and oppression. However, in the street, the essential class nature of the major forces of social contradiction can be easily obliterated and lost in the mist of national oppression and the national consciousness it elicits as a response. It is therefore important to have a broad view of the notions of domination and oppression in order to transcend those reactionary and the limiting aspects of nationalism, and in order to can truthfully reflect reality. Therefor a truly radical conceptualisation of history is a requisite, and gaining an insight to the reality which the author does not just reflect but also refracts and moulds into knowledge is an objective.

The "too much time in the street" (195) spent by Oupa of which Mary complains is neither time wasted in the shebeen nor in the dark corners of the streets robbing and senselessly murdering innocent people, but time spent in political activism. Movement in this direction is movement with the old, uninterrupted movement of the people and therefore most positive and rational, hence it is also conceived as natural. This is not the dark section which ultimately claims the life of Moipone but the political one which claims that of Boykie, Anka, Nomsisi, Fix and other revolutionaries. This is the site where the inevitable confrontation between the forces of revolution and domination is physically played out.

The significance of the street as a metaphor for political corporate consciousness is

foregrounded in the transformation of Molope who ventures out of his home and into this public sphere by visiting his detained son for the first time at the end of part one. Drastic as it appears, Molope's transformation after this visit is impressive as it records his political conscientization and new confidence in the power of collective. "When people's minds are made up," he asserts, "nothing can stop them. I never used to know that the way I know it now. It is as if you are reliving your life" (162). Tsi's mother reinforces this acquisition of confidence in the inevitability of the victory of the people against the oppressors with her significant statement which closes the first section, "I don't envy anyone who tries to control people's minds" (163).

The confidence in group action as opposed to individual alienation to which the text aspires is evident throughout the first section where Tsi's alienation is juxtaposed to progressive, even radical alternatives as exemplified by Fix and Nomsisi among others. This aspiration is intensified in section two with the symbolic structural abandonment of the subjective modernist narrator in favour of the objective realist narrator whose advantage lies in the possibility of giving more prominence to several individuals' and /or corporate point(s) of view. Section two opens with the narration of the uprisings that exploded in the streets of South Africa in June 1976. John, our centre of consciousness in this opening subsection, observes that, "Death was present that day and in those days, in the street" (164). Significantly, amid the corpses which "lay like bags of coal and potatoes in the middle of the road" the voice from the police car threateningly commands, "Move, everyone move back, go home, or you'll be shot!" (166).

Long after the uprising had been suppressed, the story of the uprising can be read on the streets of Alexandra which stand as a stark reminder "that there had been days of Power and the time of the school children" (171). Thus, the streets also become the bearers of the people's history as highlighted in Onalenna's theatrical lines:

Remember, they did it in Sharpeville long ago
 And in Cato Manor
 In Sekhukhuniland in Pondoland
 In Bulhoek
 Every time, after they do it,
 We clean the streets. (172 - 3)

The significance of the street as the high point of corporate political consciousness is also highlighted in the fact that it is the space where the Movement can practically show its visibility to the people through action. This is interestingly hinted in the observation of the multiracial crowds of supporters who "crowded the streets before going to work" (228) during Ramono's political trial. Significantly, bombs (273), guns and other weapons used by the Movement's combatants make their mark in the public arena of the street. Thus, because of their public nature, the attacks on police stations, railway lines, buildings (325), and even the assassination of Mpando which takes place in a shebeen which is also a public place, the armed actions of the Movement reinforce the significance of the street as a metaphor for that space of physical contention between the forces of oppression and revolution.

The climax of the Movement's armed struggle is the symbolic merger of the combatants with the march of the masses in the streets of Alexandra during Willy's funeral. The presence of the notorious police Granada stating the oppressors' claim to the same turf sets the stage for a showdown between the two antagonistic forces. When the armed revolutionaries wipe out all the high profile policemen and their notorious Granada in the street (306), a significant, symbolic victory against apartheid is recorded and the site of its occurrence is acclaimed. Thus, the birth of a child witnessed by Tsi on a street in Botswana at the end of the text signifies the optimistic assertion of the street as the symbolic birthplace of the post-apartheid South Africa.

CHAPTER 7

POETRY OF THE YEARS IN EXILE: BEHOLD MAMA FLOWERS, THE NIGHT KEEPS WINKING & A TOUGH TALE

“There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin. Would that surgically clean separation were true, because then at least you could have the consolation of knowing that what you have left behind is, in a sense, unthinkable and totally irrecoverable.” (Said, E. 1994: 36)

Serote's journey to exile began with a trip to the United States of America (U.S.) on a Fullbright Scholarship which took him to Columbia University where he studied for a degree in fine arts. This experience inspired Behold Mama Flowers (1978), the volume wherein Serote reflects deeply on exile as a national and personal experience. Part One of the volume is a long autobiographical poem that continues the epic tale of a typical black youth of the volatile, turbulent last two decades of the era of apartheid which was begun in No Baby Must Weep. Although the volume was published in 1978, the absence of any reference to the 16 June 1976 episode suggests that it was finished before that catastrophe and publication was delayed for some reason. The second part consists of eleven short poems dedicated to colleagues and comrades, most of whom were also in exile.

The explanation of the source of the ironic imagery of the title in the foreword is disturbing:

Listen, Skunder Boghossian says, once, a man chopped a body many, many times - he chopped this body into many, many small pieces and threw them into the flowing river. When the pieces, floating and flowing, began to dance with the rhythm of the river, a child seeing this, said, 'Mama, look at the flowers!' (8)

The juxtaposition of the flower as a symbol of natural beauty and the chopped pieces of a body which symbolise violence implicitly reflects the ascendance of violence during this period with subtle, ambiguous symbolism. Thus, by implication, violence had rooted itself in the rhythm of life and was becoming not only as natural but, also as beautiful as flowers.

As in the closing parts of the previous volume, NBMW, the journey to exile is symbolised with the image of the river while the reference to the "Mississippi, the Amazon, the Ganges" (8) in conjunction with the rivers of Africa signifies the broadening of the poet's focus to include areas beyond Africa as points of reference in line with his growing internationalism. Thus, from now onwards, Serote's analysis of issues will increasingly assume an international outlook and an outspoken sympathy with the poor and exploited whose majority live in the "Third World". In the interview with Jane Wilkinson, Serote reveals that the opening part of BME was written in the flat of an Ethiopian exile, Skunder Bhoghossian, in Washington DC. The volume's all-knowing, experienced voice which opens the poem with disturbing images expressing the anxieties and agonies of exile interestingly betrays Serote's lack of enthusiasm towards this U.S. experience. To him, the U.S. was nothing else but political exile, irrespective of the scholarship and the distance from his home.

The U. S. influence evident in the refrain, "what's going on", which is taken from the soul singer Marvin Gaye's song of the same title, as well as in the reference to American jazz artists like John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and Miles Davis (35 - 36) continues the cultural and political fraternity initiated in the poet's earlier works. Underlying these fraternal gestures is the attachment to the analysis which highlights the historical links and similarities between the situation of blacks in apartheid South Africa, including their responses, and Afro-Americans in the U.S. as was dominant in the seventies, the era of Black Power in both countries.

Thus, the common racist and material bases as the root cause of the oppression of African Americans in America and Africans in Africa serves to highlight their common origin

and symbolically strengthens their fraternity:

maybe they can say
 because they must have heard this boy's father as he screamed
 saying where are you taking me to, i belong to the continent
 and this boy was saying 'i'm american'
 and my ears heard malcom x say
 'but america does not want you here'. (55)

Evidently, the rejection and marginalisation highlighted in Malcom X's comment particularly recalls that of South African blacks under the apartheid regime which the poet and his intended audience know too well. Underlying Malcom X's simple words is the commanding advice "you better do something about it!" which the majority of both the marginalised in Africa and the U.S. have well heeded, judging by general historical events.

After completing his studies in the U.S., Serote joined other South African exiles in Botswana in 1977 where his collaboration with Thami Mnye, a visual artist and a close friend, resulted in the production of The Night Keeps Winking (1982). The volume was published by the Medu Arts Ensemble, a group of cultural activists based in Botswana of which Serote was a member, hence the high degree of experimentation. The volume consists of six drawings, a long poem of fifteen lines and four shorter ones. It is divided into three sections, "Time has run out", the long poem from which the volume derives its title, "The sun was falling" which consists of two short poems, "Exile" and "Notes", and "Listen, the baby cries and cries" which also has two poems, "Distances" and "The long road".

Serote's structural involvement with the ANC intensified with his appointment as the Head of the organisation's Department of Arts and Culture, a position he held from 1983 to 1986. Subsequently, he left Botswana for London where the office was based. Chief among the ANC's strategic objectives at this moment was the enhancement of international solidarity with the liberation cause through the isolation of the apartheid regime, and due to his position,

Serote became one of the central figures in the struggle during that era. The forty-eight pages long poem, A Tough Tale (1987) was conceived during this time and its opening line "We want the world to know" (ATT, 7) captures the emphasis on this direction. The volume is divided into two sections, "For Holes are Forever Cold and Dark and they Threaten Life" and "Life is Freedom". Once again, it was published by the London based non-establishment Kliptown Books which specifically published liberation literature from South Africa and Namibia. Contemporary urgent political issues such as exile and the armed struggle together with other developments in the history of South Africa which are dominant themes in BMF become more highlighted, more particular and, due to the point of view which is informed by active engagement in revolutionary politics, more radical in both TNKW and ATT. Nonetheless, an experienced, knowledgeable and optimistic voice filled with the confidence typical of political commitment characterises the tone of the three volumes. If the dominant question in the earlier poetry is, "who am I?", the current voice asks, "what is it that matters in this hour?" (BMF, 8). It is no longer identity but the present oppression to whose consciousness the identity question leads that matters.

Mnyele's visuals in TNKW accurately capture the heroic determination with which blacks had to respond to their contemporary predicament, in a brief, dramatic narrative. Mnyele's narrative begins with a drawing depicting a dark, undefinable object on the background and centre of the volume's cover illustration which looks like an illustration of a cell or a womb. A pair of hands and a baby are foregrounded on the sides. The second drawing depicts a foregrounded mother and child both of who are our centre of attraction. The mother has just bathed the baby and his darkened, sad face is focussed on the bathing basin while her hands direct the naked baby's vision to the open door in the opposite direction. In the street, a uniformed school girl is captured in the action of throwing a stone while two youths with raised fists hold a three-coloured flag behind her. The baby's raised right-hand fist explains the

mother's emotional state which is also emphasised through the exaggerated use of the dark, black colour especially on the mother's face.

This picture is followed by a drawing of two men whose hats suggest that they are either miners or soldiers in a heavily guarded compound, thus symbolising the unity of worker action and armed struggle at the vanguard of the struggle. Next follows the depiction of life in the match-box township houses. This life is characterised by unhealthy congestion, sadness, suffering and poverty but, as the smile on the old woman implies, the rare moments of happiness and laughter are shown to be the integral part thereof. In the insert, workers show their backs to their loved ones while the train awaits them. The situation painted in this picture symbolically recalls the challenges of black experience which dominate Serote's earlier poetry.

The second last picture shows a close cut of a black man holding his head up amid a pervading barbed wire while the insert shows another man sitting with his legs covered with a blanket on a mat which acts as his cell bed. In the last drawing we encounter the same confident man in a room; he is clad in army camouflage and an ammunition belt crosses his body while his eyes are focussed on a map of South Africa which hangs on the wall. The incarcerated figure we encountered in the previous drawing now stands naked beneath the cell window while the combination of anger and agony defines his facial outlook. Mnyele's visual narrative captures the complex pattern enforced among the majority of the lives of blacks by apartheid; the pain and suffering into which they are born, their heroic resistance, the sacrifices, the vigilance of the youth and exile, thus, it complements and echoes the concerns voiced in the poems. The confidence that dominates the visuals also links the complementary forms.

Serote's optimism is presented as confidence in the notion of progress which entails change, of which motion becomes an appropriate, predictable metaphor. Ideas, symbols and images associated with motion echo throughout the three volumes in the form of insistent

allusions to journeys, footsteps, roads, distances, and so forth. Motion is also strongly implicit in both the titles and the contents of the poems. In the interview with Jane Wilkinson, Serote explains his interest in motion as a metaphor thus:

Because within motion so much is implied: change is implied in motion; history; the future. But much more permanent in motion is change. ... Of course I don't approach it scientifically: I'm a writer and I would like to put life into that ... Now whether one talks about the river, old people, mothers: there is that motion throughout. Which means one is a historian in that sense; if I'm interested in that I'm really interested in history, in the lives of people. (184)

Prominent among the metaphors of motion is the journey, the long painful road which the speaker has to walk. This journey is the continuation of the journey which was signified by the juxtaposition of the protagonists' footprints and the sea in the last part of NBMW where it refers to the individual's resolve to join the group in the form of the liberation movement in exile which is symbolised by both the sea and the river in that book. In BMF and TNKW the journey to exile also becomes the realisation of the yearning for unity with Africa which closes the former volume. The heroic embrace of the horrific conditions of exile is realistically defined in the emphasis on the urgent relevance of the embrace of the continent and the dire condition to which it has been rendered by centuries of systematic European colonisation and its aftermath.

In "Song Of Experience", a poem he dedicated to his BC colleagues, he describes the effects of western imperialism on Africa thus:

in those days when the word of a merciless civilisation
and its footsteps which knew nothing about generosity
with its sight lacking humility
remember how our home
our fathers and mothers were taken away. (BMF,75)

His description of the devastation into which Africa has been rendered in the same poem presents us with a striking image of an agonised, abandoned old man:

africa walks like an old man i saw
 blind
 deaf
 seeking a hand to lead it through the streets
 howling
 i'm man don't i deserve help. (BMF,76)

In BMF, the Ethiopian exile Skunder Bhogossian exemplifies the typical nature of exile among the people of Africa. God's complicity in the tragedy that befell the African continent is highlighted in the metaphor of the continent that fell from His back pocket, "dropping its children all over the show" (BMF,55) which, like the title of the volume, originates from Skunder. Accusations against the Christian God's complicity and bias against Africa and its people are typical in African protest literature in general and Serote captures the material basis of this argument when he writes, in "Song of Experience":

how can we have taken so many journeys yet never arrive
 remember
 the hoe we carried beneath the whipping sun
 and the bible that we carried our eyes glued to the empty sky
 how one time we learnt sections of subsections and proclamations. (BMF, 77)

Skunder's painting, which the poet observes while in production, communicates the agony and plight of the African continent and the traumatic experiences effected on the people as a result:

and i began to pick up the pieces of the continent
 skunder boghossian
 trying to hide his heart in his palm
 made me look at him
 and i saw
 blood dripping through his fingers

smearing his brushes
 and when he looked at me
 seeing me exploding my eyes
 he kept saying
 the continent, the continent, the continent. (BME, 53)

The universalising description of exile as the African experience is not an overstatement considering that mass alienation and displacement caused by the African diaspora had escalated in the 1970's and early eighties as this was a period characterised by armed revolutions, counter-revolutions and violent civil wars, a period when the continent became the physical battleground of the protracted "Cold War" between the Western Allies and the former "Eastern Bloc" under the leadership of the then Soviet Union. Thus, Africa becomes both the world which has stopped spinning because "it is held in white palms" (BME, 29), and the exploited, brutally abused body from which the speaker springs:

Africa
 I have had no choice but to walk from between your thighs
 clad in your blood
 pus
 sweat
 clad in the shadows of your eyes blinking with pain
 clad in the memory of your aching muscles. (BME, 28-29)

Serote uses a recurring dry image of a vast desert to describe the general condition of Africa and like the Sahara, the agonies facing the continent appear to be boundless, increasing and unstoppable:

this sand
 rolling and rolling like time, like days which take away life and give it death
 this sand
 ah
 perhaps if it rained like a child i would drink and sleep ...
 ah, africa, it does matter that you take a look
 and believe that the Sahara owns you
 that you own nothing

behold
 your nightmare grows and grows like waves of the sea ...
 now that we know of the breathing nuclear bombs
 which purr like cats ready to pounce on rats. (BMF, 34)

Africa, this barren dryness symbolised by the sand, is an unshakable heritage and a heavy burden which weighs on the hearts of her children whom it follows wherever they are scattered as illustrated in the dramatic effect of Skunder's painting on the poet:

and the ethiopian sand burst into the room
 the sand of the continent
 whirling out from the music box
 the thin sand
 filling the washington apartment and weaving our feet
 we waded ...
 and the music kept pouring out sand and sand as thin as air
 binding my legs. (BMF, 54)

The symbolic association of music with the plight of the continent is an implicit statement endorsing the relevance of the socio-political role of art which extends to international issues.

Interestingly, exile does not only define the alienation experienced in foreign lands where "other people offered their land to us / or ... treated us like dogs for we had none" (ATT, 40), but also refers to the conditions which compel him to flee his country as evident in the assertion, "if you read the graffiti on my face, in my eyes, on my palms / all i needed was to have a home and sing my songs" (BMF, 49). The torture he experiences at home is akin to the pain recalled in the biblical song of the Israelites near the rivers of Babylon in BMF:

everywhere the laughter of the wind mocked us
 we were made to sing songs and be laughed at
 we were made to weep and be laughed at
 while we looked
 and we knew that the kraal had fallen. (BMF, 59)

In "Time has Run Out", he comments on this condition of alienation and internal exile thus:

alas
 we did amazing things to say simple things
 we are human and this is our land
 We walked the streets and roads of this country
 longing for a home in our land. (TNKW, 13)

The ultimate signification of exile is the alienation from earth itself and the cold, dark hole, which is the central leitmotif in ATT symbolises this annihilation appropriately. The dark mine hole which swallows migrant miners in South African mines is symbolic of this untimely end and the agonies experienced by these miners in the mine compounds reflect the bitter essence of this notion of internal exile. Thus, the situation of these migrant labourers recalls the ugly realities of exile:

these men
 emerge from the hole
 to the sunlight which never yields no hope
 for it never visits their compound
 where other men lie on their backs and stare at the asbestos ceiling
 as their minds like wailing glass
 shatter against the thick wall of loneliness.
 where is my wife
 my children, mother, my father
 my brother. (ATT, 12)

The opening line which is also a refrain in BMF, "on the road" (11), symbolically captures the preoccupation with the journey to exile and the speaker immediately highlights the awaiting hostility:

on the road,
 what do we want
 this world
 being so careless with lost children. (BMF, 11)

Comforting himself with the knowledge that the journey to exile is not baseless and vain, he

argues that one day people can say "he went because he had to go" (BMF, 50) despite the pain of the removal from his loved ones which makes him a "womanless man" as he watches his "woman's gait become foreign" (Ibid) to him.

In the poem dedicated to Thami Mnyele, "Poem: On Distances" and in the poem "For Those Of Us Who Make Music" which is dedicated to the exiled musician compatriot Jonas Gwangwa the poet captures the anxiety of exile with the image of a restless person tossing and turning in bed. The uncertainty which accompanies this anxiety is explicit in the final lines, "as i start / i do not know where i will end / the distance behind me is so deep, so dark" (BMF, 66). In the later poem, "Exile", silence or loneliness from which other agonies stem is identified as the major factor:

it is quiet here,
 the silence is blue, large and far from the tree tops
 it hangs above, this silence, concave and massive ...
 so I would like to say, when people ask, how is exile;
 it is quiet here.
 But that is a lie, or, a half-truth -
 here, the bad things I once said about memory
 come back. (TNKW, 16)

The images of heat and suffocation in "The Long Road", capture the hostile, alien atmosphere:

we cannot lie on our back
 we cannot stretch our legs and our arms
 we cannot show our soft-white belly to the red hot sun
 we cannot lie on our back ...
 the sun sings with the heat here
 the sun has teeth. (TNKW, 27)

These images are reiterated in ATT where the dehumanisation enforced by exile is described as "bewilderment" and the language reinforces the transformation of humans to animals thus:

here
 under the naked light of the sun
 we perch on tree tops, we grow gentle eyes
 we turn the nerves of sinews into thin steel wires
 and merge our voices with the breeze of the open air. (ATT, 8)

In the same volume, the intrinsic brutality of exile is described with images which capture the extreme inhabitability of its environment:

here
 it gets too cold
 or too hot
 and at times too wet
 or too dry ...
 we have all come to know
 that the weather is not good for anyone. (ATT, 9)

As with any experience, however, the mind reconciles itself with the harsh conditions of existence in exile as he notes later in the same poem, "with thorns as bright as the sun rays / the silence here is very familiar now" (TNKW, 29). In addition, exile is also viewed as an opportunity to forge "comrades" (ATT, 37) and discover new friends as attested by the poet's association with Skunder Boghossian.

Underlying his acute awareness and expectation of hostility is a deep sense of hope which is based on the understanding that this hope, this dream, can only be realised through bold action and painful sacrifice. In "When Lights Go Out", a poem dedicated to "some who are in south african jails" (BME, 69), Serote captures the lowest, most desperate moments encountered by those who fight for freedom. The maddening loneliness and the tortuous dragging of time experienced by those languishing in apartheid prisons is not just highlighted but also indicted for its silence "about how we could wake up tomorrow and build a day" (BME, 69). Consequently, in his encouragement to these comrades, he does not necessarily

underestimate the suffering but rather looks beyond it and highlights those positive aspects in the situation which inspire hope at the point where hope is needed most:

today you watch and wait
 so one day hope begins to walk again ...
 across a wilderness, where there were no paths
 where screams echoed, as if never to stop
 it is when there is no hope, that hope begins to walk again ...
 hope never befriends fools. (BMF, 70)

The poet knows that the trying circumstances to which the prisoners are subjected is a situation of life and death where true comradeship is made or broken. Similarly, those sisters and brothers "who maybe weary" are reminded of the evil force which chased them from their home in "Heat and Sweat" and warned to take their cue from history because, the poet warns, "if you did not listen when the past was breathing / the present erases your name" (BMF, 71). Thus, even when the vicious cross border raids of the 1980's which saw the bombing of Serote's comrades in the frontline states are recalled, the sorrow gives way to hope and confidence:

maybe too long in an embrace with one long missed
 we overslept
 or slept at the wrong minute
 and thus gave the enemy a moment
 to calculate and time to reach us
 Then, I must admit -
 our sorrow is as red as blood ...
 - we expect the enemy to be so -
 each of his acts
 like rain after a long drought
 will leave us, like the landscape -
 green
 trees sprouting little leaflets
 grass being fresh and flowers sprouting. (ATT, 19 - 20)

The notion of exile as a tactical political arena in the theatre of resistance rather than a

convenient sanctuary against apartheid abuses underlies the optimism in the opening of BMF where even though the speaker acknowledges the precariousness of exile, his optimism still dominates. Thus, filled with defiance and confidence, he declares:

there is nothing that we must forget or let be
 forgotten
 unless this earth
 even the stars give in and drown in the sea
 nothing
 nothing matters ...
 i will live forever, until the heads of this earth
 like unwatered sunflowers, will dangle ...
 as i climb-reach for the sky and the stars
 looking down on the neon flowers dappling their colours on the earth.
 (BMF, 12 - 13)

The optimism we immediately encounter in these volumes takes history as its reference point and it is uncompromisingly outspoken about slavery as the archetypal condition into which Africans and South Africans are forced by the collusion of apartheid and capitalism in general. This alliance is symbolised by the twin images of the rand and the dollar which awaken repulsion, anger and determination in the poet, "i will defy the chains of the rand with its frozen face / i will defy the chains of the dollar with its frozen eagle in flight" (BMF, 12). The charge of complicity with apartheid against Western powers is more vocal in ATT where it is based on the attitude of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the two contemporary conservative leaders of the U. K. and the U. S. respectively, who were against the isolation of the apartheid regime advocated by the liberation movement:

Botha's voice is heard calling -
 teargas, rubber bullets, Hippos and Casspirs
 mow down children, women and men
 while Reagan smiles
 and Thatcher grins
 let them,

the friendship presents they give the Boers
are death makers for us
let them be friends. (ATT, 28)

In BMF, the intransigence of the ruling whites is directly blamed for the continuing crisis which threatens to erupt into a catastrophic explosion:

ah
they never listened
or looked
everything, their eyes their mouths were shut
time now holds everyone hostage
what is going to happen now. (BMF, 21)

In an exposition of its barbarity, Apartheid is presented as an abnormal distortion and a forceful denial of the simple, natural pleasures of life to the oppressed:

what does a man want
to drink
to dance
to laugh and cry ...
i want to walk with ease, laugh and kiss with a
giggle in my heart. (BMF, 19 - 20)

In the face of such dehumanisation and humiliation, the poet recalls the intransigence of the oppressors which resulted in their rejection of earlier attempts at negotiations by the liberation movement:

because when we began to talk
when we began to think
when we began to ask
we were left with our tongues hanging out
dry and thirsty
and the tears of our mothers were wetting our feet. (BMF, 17)

The arrogance represented by the rejection of talks and the intensification of oppression fills the poet with fear and anxiety as he is aware of the dangerous implications of the only option left by the flat rejection of dialogue by the oppressors, hence the refrain which opens the long poem, "fear pulsating near me as if it were my footsteps" (BME, 11) and the congestion of images signifying 'trembling', 'sweating', 'restlessness', etc., which reinforce this fear in the opening pages.

The realisation of the futility of talks at this juncture also elicits sentiments of sadness and disappointment at the missed opportunity on the one hand while it exposes the initial reluctance and uncertainty with which the poet accepts the violent option as implicit in the recurring question, "what will happen" (BME, 14). This reluctance is evident in his acknowledgement of the difficulty he encounters as he is forced to substitute 'love' with 'hatred', a decision which clearly weighs heavily on his consciousness as implicit in the declaration, "how do i tell you that it has been hard / ... / it has been hard to hate these people" (BME, 46). The question, "what will happen now?" is directed at both his people, with whom he shares the burden placed by the knowledge of the political status quo, as well as the oppressors who are the cause of the crisis.

The white oppressor is challenged to contemplate the implications of his rejection of the symbolic gesture of love which was represented by the proposal for negotiations:

what will happen then
when we no longer look at each other
how can we talk
if we don't see each other
what will happen now, now that our tongues drip of pus. (BME, 15)

At the same time, this contemplation on the dreadful future is a call to blacks to follow the logic of action dictated by their political knowledge and their historical situation, thus as in

NBMW where the poet emphasises unity in action or comradeship with the brother, he asserts:

my brother, it was when we looked at each other that we recognised each other

...

like i was saying to the sisters
 my brother, now hold my hand ...
 since we know what we have come to know
 my brother
 for now
 there is only blood
 there are no more tears
 we can never be able to turn away. (BMF, 38)

The unequivocal acceptance of the armed option results from the hardening of attitude which comes with committed political involvement and it also specifically entails the use of an appropriate language as implied later, "my tongue is bloodstained forever" (BMF, 33). At the same time, violence itself is not portrayed as the natural reaction but as a desperate resort to which people are forced by the unremitting, violent aggression of oppression, thus, the contemporary days of "the rapid machine-gun laughter", declares the speaker, are the ones which "now twist and distort our gait" (BMF, 24). Thus the speaker is not oblivious to the horrific national catastrophe which he correctly foresees but, nevertheless, reluctantly embraces it as an inevitable evil though he implicitly asserts that it might have been avoided earlier:

Too much blood has been spilled
 Please my countrymen, can someone say a word of wisdom
 It is too late
 Blood, no matter how little of it
 when it spills on the brain
 on the memory of a nation
 it is as if the sea floods the earth
 The lights go out
 mad hounds howl in the dark . (TNKW, 7)

The issue of a home, the deprivation of that home which defines the notion of internal

exile and also expresses the condition of the oppressed under a repressive regime is central in the resolve to take up arms:

we have seen wombs swallow back their foetuses
 if children die because they are hungry
 and mothers vomit their lives rather than give birth
 what else can we say about having a home ...
 where is it that we are where when children ask: is this home
 can we say yes this is home my child. (BMF, 76)

In "Modes of Introits From Familiar Sights", this assault on the very basis of the family institution stimulates the ultimate commitment and a heroic defiance as expressed by the absolute preparedness to make the supreme sacrifice for the reclamation of the home:

our tongues having survived throttling assaults
 we will keep a simple speech:
 maybe we cannot own land, but to own a home is not a favour
 we do know that ...
 and we can never be nice about claiming a home. (BMF, 86)

In the face of brutal apartheid repression the moment of fighting back in kind is anticipated with a paradoxical combination of sadness and resolve in BMF:

now the time has come
 the hour
 it breaks my heart and leaves me tearless
 the hour is here
 if we can't have a home nobody must have a home
 the hour even burdens the sun. (BMF, 57)

Similarly, the message is straight and simple in "Time Has Run Out" where the poet asserts, "We must claim our land, even if we die in the process. / Our history is the culture of resistance" (TNKW, 6). Once that culture of radical resistance is recalled and its direction

traced, it inevitably leads to the armed struggle which, in the South African context, was waged by the exiled liberation movement from the early sixties until it was relinquished as a political strategy in 1990.

The adoption of the armed struggle signals the advance from primitive, sporadic armed actions to the modern, organised guerrilla offensive and Serote's celebration of this moment in the poetry also becomes more radical in its political character. Conversely the images and symbols of this military strategy are celebrated and the peripheral language of the struggle is incorporated into the formal language in the process. Thus, traditional weapons such as sticks and spears are symbolically transformed to modern firearms linking both the history armed revolution and that of the oppressed in general, "remember how it was when we learnt that those who had gone / had learnt to use spears that spat fire" (BMF, 84). In "The Long Road", the abundance of arms is noted thus, "sticks of arrows thinner than a child's arm / now bloom like flowers in spring / bursting into red, blue, purple, orange flames" (TNKW, 29).

The reassuring knowledge of the availability of military weapons and organised revolutionary strategy not only inspires hope among the masses but also stimulates unprecedented heroism and confidence. This is dramatically illustrated in the figure of a guerilla combatant who is about to embark on a mission in "The Long Road":

the river floods and flows
 plants whistle through the soil
 a man bare feet
 red soiled clothes
 and a heart, harder than a rail track
 reads the sun and the river
 and picks up a gun.
 how, how is the long road measured. (TNKW, 28)

Armed thus, with such optimism and historical consciousness, the speaker can give a calm, contextualised analysis of the implications of violence from a point of view of a

revolutionary, especially the implicit sanction of the taking of human life:

my brother, i have said our habits may have to be terrible ...
 and fury is a way of saying: soon as we knew what a kaffir is
 we can not spend our lives saying it is a lie
 our lives will have to take other lives as we define ours
 yes
 we shall have to be eloquent about that. (BMF, 86)

The taking of "other lives" signifies, on the one hand, the inevitability of an armed response in the face of an oppressive, militaristic regime to which absolute blame for the origin and escalation of violence must inevitably be directed while highlighting, on the other, the crucial transformation of the ordinary individual to a disciplined revolutionary.

Although the choice of armed struggle may appear voluntary as implicit in the title of the third section of "Song of Experience", "we choose weapons" (BMF, 77), it is the commitment to change and the essential desire to "humble to joy and peace" (BMF, 78) which actually compels the speaker to take up arms. The symbols of this level of revolutionary consciousness are the rattling, fire-spitting AK47 automatic guns (BMF, 49, 81) and the blue flames of explosions which wreck cities as the oppressed forcefully reclaim their lost kingdom and subject of history:

I said
 blue flames are leaping to the sky in my country ...
 they made our land a palace of foreigners
 now we make blue flames inside this hour. (TNKW, 14)

Significantly, in ATT Serote moves beyond the moralising attitudes of many observers who condemned the burning to death of collaborators during the township uprisings of 1985 as he views these "excesses" in the context of the armed struggle which he celebrates:

as the sky watched the Sasol flames rage

we eyed victory
 not so long ago,
 when the children
 mounted the old wounds
 creating smoke, fire and ash
 creating debris
 of beer halls ...
 Bantu Affairs Commissioners' Offices
 creating corpses
 of councillors, informers and puppets
 articulating with precision
 that
 oppression negates life. (ATT, 26 - 27)

The bloody days of the armed conflict are not the end but a means to an end according to the poet's analysis as suggested by the predominance of the images of 'birth', 'germinating seeds' and the 'dawn of the new day' in the three volumes. Birth is the antithesis of the death signified by apartheid and the pain, labour and suffering that precede it represent the struggle for freedom. The consequence of the resistance of apartheid to this natural process is as unnatural as the refusal of a baby to be born, "this strange fruit / hanging in the air like a baby / in mid life and mid death, refusing to be born" (BMF, 22 - 23). In "Song of Experience" apartheid devastation is symbolised by the inversion of birth as "mothers vomit their lives rather than give birth" (BMF, 76).

Despite all the pain and all the risks presented by apartheid, the speaker points to the inevitability and necessity of the process thus:

my brother
 we shall learn from women that birth
 is a body whistling and whistling with pain
 we shall learn that death can be blind like a mad wind
 it can take everything and leave nothing behind
 yet we must still give birth. (BMF, 32)

Because the birth of a new society can only be founded on the grave of the old one which, in turn, was founded on the deathbed of the one prior it, "birth and death", according to the poet,

"have the same reasons to abort" (BMF, 85). The violent option with which this social birth can be attained is captured in "Song of Experience" while the danger of the degeneration of the coming new regime into a post-independence tyranny like many other African states is significantly not overlooked:

and now we wield a gun as if it were a whisk
 the water of the womb spills now
 and the blood dries on the thighs
 the face of the day frowns with pain
 do we have a speech for this child
 or is it another urchin. (BMF, 77)

As in earlier poems, the call to arms is particularly extended to blacks who are still outside of the revolutionary movement, "tell me / what are all these brothers and sisters doing in the streets / frozen like that in these awkward poses" (BMF, 40). Notably, the typical, symbolic polarisation of earlier works between passivity and action, despair and optimism, the progressive and the reactionary crowds, etc., still persists. The street-home antithesis which dominates earlier works especially the TEBIB and NBMW is also recalled in the speaker's plea to his symbolic brother, "let us walk in the streets as we have done / it is better to curse in the street than in a home" (BMF, 42). Thus, even in the face of the effects of the painful, negative side of exile, the longing in "Time Has Run Out", is, "not only of the family we love" but, also "for a family of comrades" (TNKW, 13).

Again, the unity with the brother is not only symbolic but also significantly strategic in its explicit functionality and relevance to the situation:

ah, my brother
 it was when you looked at me
 and i looked at you that in your eyes red with blood
 your eyes
 the mirror of this our land
 stained and red as if perspiring with blood

ah
 my brother, it was when we looked at each other
 that we recognised each other. (BMF, 38)

Simultaneously, the reasoning, slightly compassionate tone which had been characteristic of earlier references to whites is gradually replaced with a confrontational tone which is filled with anger and hatred.

The devastating effect of European imperialism is defined with the metaphor of the storm which captures the nakedness of its unsparing brutality:

that storm wiped the cattle like you wipe your nose clean
 the old man watched
 and knew that the village was not going to make it
 ah
 they said the spear was spitting fire
 it made thunder which stormed on hopes, homes, children and women.
 (BMF,59)

The system's ruthlessness and greed are highlighted when the poet urges his brother to rise up for the sake of the future. Tomorrow, he argues:

could be held in our hands while we tremble
 or is held in the hands of those who know things about raping
 those whose eyes, vomiting fury
 and insatiable greed
 whose ears
 filled with screams of their sins
 can't listen. (BMF, 42)

Significantly, his hardened attitude is captured by the change implicit in the ironic juxtaposition of despair and fear on the one hand with the agility of a tiger and the hissing, angry snake, on the other (BMF, 47). This inspires in the speaker a confidence to make a direct, public statement of defiance, which he symbolically makes in writing thus highlighting the centrality of political commitment in the poet's view of art:

i write you a letter
 by dipping my finger into my blood, or is it already pus
 i can't come here, tumbling down
 then vanish as if i were a snowblade
 nobody did that
 all those who came before me, who stored my blood in their loins
 never tumbled down and vanished. (BMF, 47 - 48)

Conversely, the resistance struggle and its history form the basis of the confident tone, hence the faith in the culmination of previous defeats to ultimate victory. Thus the first poem in TNKW opens with a powerful celebratory acknowledgement of the importance of past resistance battles as historical milestones and sources of inspiration and political knowledge:

in this strange land which mutes screams
 the night
 with its bright eye-ball
 which bears boots and prints
 tells about days which came and went ...
 yes -
 we did make distances
 whose milestones are broken droplets of blood. (TNKW,3)

Thus, the days of the wars of armed resistance against colonial conquest, those days when spears faced "guns and canons" (TNKW, 8), are celebrated and recorded.

The continuity of the struggle is highlighted, as in NBMW, with the imagery of a long, flowing and dragging movement whose milestones are battles such as Bulhoek, Blood River, Sharpeville, Soweto, etc. This is the painful, challenging time which must be ultimately forcefully moulded to favour the oppressed who, in turn, are reminded of their role in making that future day a reality as well as the sacrifices that the moment will demand from them:

at this disastrous hour ...
 fear blooms to hate
 here

where love of freedom
 hammers hate as if a red hot-iron
 bends
 bends
 rings into song of commitment. (Ibid, 10)

Similarly, honouring of the heroes of the struggle which dates back to early poems like "Seeds and Saints" continues and as in the earlier poems, these are the prominent revolutionaries in the struggles of blacks in South Africa, Africa and the U. S. The political mobilisation function compels this continued emphasis on blackness and black solidarity across the political spectrum and exposes the residual aspects of the BC philosophy which continued to influence the poet. Thus, leaders who represent the dominant, but also antagonistic trends within black resistance politics are grouped together:

when fruits are ripe they fall to the ground
 and leave a seed
 ah
 how can we forget
 luthuli's voice, sightless, it crashed into a train and died
 how can we forget
 sobukhwe
 like a distorted journey twisted into ways of death
 and voices held hostage
 king's bloody words dangling in the air
 malcom
 look at the bloody strange fruit. (BMF, 23)

Notably, in TNKW and ATT the analogical reference to American issues and personalities together with the acclamation of heroes from outside the ANC camp decreases as issues more specific to the ANC as well as the struggles in the Southern Africa which was under apartheid destabilisation take precedence. The issues become more particular and urgent also because, by this time, Serote had settled in his active duties within the ANC.

In "Time Has Run Out" the poet reflects on the torture and murder of Biko in

detention, the 45th such victim, and instead of despairing in the face of the barbaric violence of the state which he so aptly describes he gains strength from his confidence that as a revolutionary, Biko knew "that he would make it to his funeral / that the people would claim his battered remains" (TNKW, 5). Consequently, his death is seen in the context of the wider colonial violence which dates back to the era of slavery and colonial wars hence he declares, "we in my country fought and fell and keep fighting / ask blood river / and Soweto will answer" (Ibid).

The clashes with the oppressive regime evoke a confidence that is based on the realisation that only the intensification of such battles can weaken and ultimately destroy apartheid. Thus, in ATT this confidence is heightened with the recollection of the armed activities against the apartheid regime and the satisfaction he derives from his participation in this heroic entrance into hitherto hostile history is explicit:

we are men and women
 a people whose experience cannot be measured with a ruler
 we did strike at Pretoria HQ
 with anger and precision
 remember, oh comrade
 that history which ever seemed to discard us
 which forever threw us on the banks of the river
 taught us
 that with warm hearts and clear minds
 with clean hands and unsparing tongues
 with eyes which have sight and can see
 we can take it in our arms to destroy oppression and exploitation. (ATT, 18)

Similarly, in "Notes", the martyrs who have already fought and fell are recalled to authenticate the poet's faith in the power of revolutionary action:

a day is made by us
 when we will it when we carry the night through
 how?
 I ask Steve

and I ask Solomon ...
 I ask the night which gave birth to a red day
 June 16
 remember
 when we learnt to trip a hippo in the night. (TNKW, 20-21)

Their blood, he argues in "Time Has Run Out", is the heart that beats inside the body of the national liberation (12).

Interestingly, the old man character who represents the defeated father figure in the earlier volumes is treated with noticeable sympathy and respect. In an explicit retraction of his earlier negative comments, he acknowledges the sacrifices and the positive contribution of the older generation to the struggle:

when you look at me and i look at you
 does it matter where we die
 like the distances that you have left behind
 where your footprints have been taken away by the wind. (BME, 19)

Similarly, he openly acknowledges the ignorance he displays in his earlier attitude and shows a more analytical understanding of the predicament of the older generation under the circumstances of colonial conquest as he writes in "The Long Road":

remember
 those days when we sat around a brazaire
 not far from us, the wind whistling and whistling
 and we watched
 the gait of the old
 as they came from work to die
 or went to work to destroy their strength for nothing
 remember how we did not understand
 that they were carrying oppression on their shoulders
 silent
 and plotting? (TNKW, 30)

In "Notes for a Fighter", the old are described with a befitting, positive imagery thus,

"remember / how like a ship sails in the stormy sea / the old walked straight, through nightmares / refusing to drown" (BMF, 82). Significantly, the ultimate tribute to the elders is paid when they are implicitly assured of being elevated to the level of the ancestors and depicted as the anointers of the journey to exile and the armed revolution in which it culminates:

we can remember how our old went and became the dead
 but the sparkle of their eyes
 and the eloquence of their speech
 even the way they used to sit and stare as if sightless
 silent as if speechless
 don't that say move, move my child
 so the memory remains. (BMF, 84)

The older people's experience and their teachings inspire the fighting spirit of the young cadres in ATT:

we grew, watching the old disintegrate
 yet
 strong like steel in their words
 warning of days to come or days which are here
 shaped by apartheid oppression and exploitation
 today we mount the words of the old ...
 they say life rejects oppression
 we mount them
 as if we tame tigers. (ATT, 24)

The climactic point of commitment is not just exile and the eloquent celebration of past defeats but, more critically and relevant to the revolutionary politics to which the poet aspires, it is commitment to the armed struggle as the best contemporary catalyst for serious political change. Thus, in "Time Has Run Out", he emphatically warns:

Yet,
 that is not enough

memories don't break chains
 nor does dying like dogs or cattle
 or throwing stones and bricks at mad armed men
 nor do lies at the U.N. or anywhere else. (TNKW, 6)

Notably, the symbol of the affirming attitude towards action is, once again, the hand, the human organ for action, but the long road filled with symbolic footsteps has to take the speaker to exile before he can be able to tear the monumental hill of apartheid which "stands like the will of time" (BMF, 47) apart.

Not surprisingly, metaphors of the journey to exile are notably abundant in BMF which is the first volume in exile while most references to the journey in TNKW and ATT concern the return for fighting or freedom day. The certain possibility of change guaranteed by the journey strengthens the confidence and builds the enthusiasm to undertake it even with the full awareness of the dangers signified by the bloody footprints. As each step in this long walk signifies unity with those who travelled the road before, the interconnection between the speaker's present and his past is highlighted as in the opening of "Once more: The Distances":

you shall remember
 - because memory, unlike the eye, knows no sleep -
 that today comes from a past day
 the footprints of that day
 like the wind
 are everywhere now. (TNKW, 25)

The predominance of images of aborted births in BMF however, implicitly betrays the awe, bafflement and uncertainty which flows under the openly confident authorial voice of this earlier work. This ambiguity is transcended and replaced with an unambiguously self assured voice in TNKW and ATT where the leitmotif signifies the dawn of the day of liberation which is guaranteed by the armed struggle. Thus, the significance of the fires caused by the guerillas' bombs and guns is not death and destruction but a sign that "time is here /

when the little ones, like a seed / must pierce the ground and let the winter pass by" (TNKW, 29).

The importance of action as the major catalyst of this birth is stressed with the metaphor of a hand in "Once More: The Distances":

ah my beloved
 lets write a letter to the world
 that the caress of the palms of our hands
 the touch of the tips of our fingers
 and the warmth of our lips
 during warm nights
 and very cold ones
 soon will ripen into a first baby cry! (TNKW, 26)

Similarly, the importance unity in action of the various sectors of the working class community as a prerequisite for the dawn of this new day is emphasised in ATT:

conscious
 we hold hands
 workers, schoolchildren, women
 we build barricades and bridges
 make fire, sing songs ...
 for
 on the palm of our hands, like a warm egg
 a new world will crack the shell
 will emerge. (ATT, 27)

Finally, as the agents of the optimism signified by the metaphor of birth and thus conscious creators of their own destiny, the revolutionaries are elevated to the status of the Creator:

we will wait as time unfolds
 and we hold it in the palm of our hands
 for we are gods
 who make children

who make the hour of the day
whose word will be final about our destiny
so it is
if you listen to the wind
and look at the sun or moon
if you can
and you watch the day unfold
and the night unroll its shadows
you have heard the footsteps of god
and have seen love of life
whose birth
is blood. (ATT, 29)

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CHAPTER 7THE LATER POEMS: THIRD WORLD EXPRESS, COME AND HOPE WITH ME &
FREEDOM LAMENT AND SONG

“It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of Contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant - like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.” (Achebe, 1975: 78)

When the Nationalist party leader and South African state president F. W. De Klerk announced the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of the formerly banned liberation movements in February 1990, a new political era was ushered in. An unprecedented mood of optimism gripped the country as the oppressed masses anticipated the realisation of their long awaited liberation. For many, the rapid demise of apartheid promised by De Klerk's parliamentary speech meant the real possibility of the participation of the excluded black majority in the governing of the country. It was a promise of peace and a break with the violence which was steadily assuming the dreadful character of a civil war.

However, not long after the initial excitement, it became clear that the forces opposed to the transition were bent on unleashing mayhem in order to reverse or stop the reform process. Ultra right wing groups openly defied the peace process and engaged themselves in violent activities in order to undermine it. Powerful elements within the state security machinery escalated their violent activities against the liberation movement and its constituency. To exacerbate matters, the government's inability to control the violent activities of these anti-negotiations forces was viewed as a clear sign of its complicity and sanction thereof. On the far left, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) blatantly refused to suspend its armed struggle and instead vowed to intensify its violent activities against "white" targets which included ordinary civilians in their definition.

Furthermore, the "Low Intensity Warfare" that had been raging in the province of Kwazulu-Natal between the ANC aligned UDF supporters and Inkatha became, by far, the greatest threat to peace when it intensified and spilled over to the East Rand where Inkatha aligned hostel dwellers and ANC aligned township residents slaughtered each other in the "black on black violence". Heightening this problem was the public allegation of the collusion of the apartheid security machinery with Inkatha vigilantes which culminated in the much publicised "Inkathagate" that provided concrete proof of clandestine government funding for Inkatha. In her introductory paper to South African Review 6: From "Red Friday" to CODESA (1992), "Launched on a Bloody Tide: Negotiating the New South Africa" Jo-Anne Collinge writes:

Analysts who foretold at the end of 1989 that constitutional negotiations would prove 'another kind of war' or a 'new terrain of struggle' could not have known how literally their visions would be fulfilled. The political violence which spread lightning-like from Natal to the Reef in the latter part of 1990 - raising the death toll to an unprecedented 1 800 in the ten-month period from August 1990 to May 1991 - became arguably the greatest determinant of the early phase of negotiations. (1992: 1)

It is the frustrating experiences of this period of transition, where the initial positive euphoria which followed De Klerk's speech was quickly replaced by the stark reality of the trials and tribulations underlying the transition from apartheid to Democracy, which are the major influence in Serote's last three poetry volumes. Subsequently, the most dominant theme which threads through the three volumes is the demand for peace and this concern, although primarily focused on the urgent need for peace in South Africa, is not only confined to that country but reflects on the need for peace in other regions, countries, continents and places where violence is endemic.

Serote returned from exile to head the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture in 1991

and a year later, Third World Express (1992) was published by David Philip publishers. As the express metaphor of the title indicates, the volume is a meditation about the alleviation of the distressing conditions obtaining in the "Third World" areas. The train metaphor evokes the Biblical "sweet" chariot which was popularised by the Negro spirituals. Similar to the chariot's use in Negro spiritual songs, the speaker recalls the express after a night of carnage where he had to participate in the removal of dead bodies:

after the noise died down
 I saw droplets on my shoes
 ah my friends
 sometimes I wonder
 when's the express coming
 with its speedy wind it must come
 at night
 in the morning
 it must come. (TWE, 31)

Later, the express is imbued with all the metaphors of motion used to describe the struggle for freedom in earlier texts as it is likened to the wind, the river and the "mad dam" (32). Thus, rather than a representation of a wish to transcend the realities of the situation as the Biblical example of the chariot implies, the metaphor develops the pragmatism initiated in the earlier praises of the struggle. The belief in motion as a sign of action and a guarantee for change is encapsulated in the speaker's description of the express in the closing statement of the volume:

it is that wind
 it is that voice buzzing
 it is whispering and whistling on the wires
 miles upon miles upon miles ...
 in the subway track
 in the rolling road
 in the not silent bush
 it is the voice of the noise
 here it comes

the Third World Express
they must say, here we go again. (TWE, 35)

Come and Hope With Me (1994) was conceived during the climactic point of the transition period and it was also published by David Philip. Simultaneous with the great hopes raised by the culmination of the negotiations in the announcement of the date for the first authentically democratic elections, the threatening spectre of civil war became even more acute. Mobilisation and violent actions by both the ultra right wing and the Africanists explicitly sought to sabotage the whole process. The volume is Serote's plea for a national commitment to peace, hope, reconciliation and unity. In the book he rallies the people of South Africa around these concepts in the sad hour of their uncertainty and anxiety.

The message of hope contained in the title weaves through the volume as the speaker urges his people on in spite of the difficult times they are experiencing. Thus, in the very opening passage he recalls how hope propelled the freedom fighters even when the day of freedom implied by the 1994 elections seemed distant and unreachable. This ability to hope is defined as faith in the inevitability of freedom and victory against apartheid and because of its timelessness, it is a natural strength onto which the oppressed must hold as they look straight onto the face of contemporary difficulties:

my child
here we dream and desire
we hope
child
the seed of this hope is buried deep
it lies in the eye and ear
in the sullen face
it lies deep in time
it awaits you ...
to climb the steep and slope ...
come and hope with me
when it is dark
when it rains

when it is cold here ...
 come and hope with me child. (CHWM, 19)

In line with Serote's notable creation and use of empowering metaphors, the concept of hope is heavily laden with personification and, as a result, it attains the crucial ability to act, to be a subject. Thus, hopes and dreams are transformed from the passive essence they acquire in their ordinary linguistic usage to metaphors of the activity synonymous with the struggle. Subsequently, after the assassination of the popular ANC and Communist Party leader, Chris Hani, by the Far Rightists, which nearly plunged the country into the abyss of civil war, the language of the speaker emphasises this notion of hope as a metaphor not only for the freedom day he is longing for but also a metaphor for the struggle itself:

we buried Chris ...
 we had become aware of the steep and slope of the road
 and the load on our shoulders
 with skill
 we seized on dreams
 here we must hope and dream ...
 we must dream and desire and hope
 we must fight and hope
 we must hope and fight
 here we must hope and fight. (Ibid, 21 - 22)

Together with Mayibuye Books of the University of Western Cape, David Philip published the latest volume of poetry from Serote's pen, Freedom Lament and Song (1997). Written in the post-1994 elections period it is, as the title betrays, a combination of a freedom celebration, a complaint against the forces opposed to that freedom and an elegy to his dead comrades. As it is written against the background of mounting hostility among the parties who had initially agreed to serve with the ruling ANC in the short-lived "Government of National Unity" as well as increasing criticism from groups outside of parliament, the poem opens with a harsh polemic against these opponents. He defines them as pessimists "who have lost

modesty, ... liars, fools, cheats, betrayers" (Ibid, 2).

Overwhelmed by admiration for the beauty of the city of Cape Town, the rejuvenating weather, the inspiring landscapes and the elegant serenity of 'The Company Gardens' where the Parliament Building wherein he and his comrades currently dominate, the poet explains the motive of his antagonism thus:

pessimism is not, will not in the heart
 in the mind
 be positive unless challenged
 then the effort and the strength is worth it. (Ibid, 1)

Accordingly, it is this pessimism which threatens to destroy the principles of non-racialism, non-sexism, equality and justice for all; for which his party had struggled to engender in society and this threat culminates in the destruction of life by the spectre of civil war.

The incessant violence which threatens to erupt into a full blown civil war is seen in the context of both the violence which characterised the apartheid era in South Africa as well as that which saw the destabilisation of Africa in the post-independence, 'Cold War', period. In FLS (1997) the devastation is worsened by poverty and ignorance which are, in turn, worsened by it and together, these are contrasted with the attractiveness of the landscape which highlights the suppressed potential and the ignored, desecrated beauty of the continent:

here
 in this beautiful
 this beauty of lands, trees and mountains
 plants and animals
 this beauty of life in life ...
 poverty eats the child and the father
 it eats its mother
 it eats their eyes for breakfast
 it eats their breasts for supper ...
 it eats their body and brain for lunch ...
 poverty here laughs with ghosts ...

poverty in and after the war
 Angola
 Mozambique. (FLS, 41)

The collaboration of poverty and violence in the destruction of life stretches across oceans in TWE (1992) to include Latin America, Asia, the "betrayed" multitudes of the former Eastern Bloc and the inhabitants of the ghettos of the "mighty" metropolitan cities (FLS, 34). Thus, Serote universalises the pain of deprivation in the true spirit of an intellectual advocated by Said and Bhabha, both of whom follow Fanon's theories (cf. Introduction). The suffering of these "wretched of the earth" is further aggravated by natural disasters which seem to collude with the material forces initiating this devastation:

as the tips of our fingers, from which we hang,
 begin to bleed
 as the mind throbs and pounds in delirium
 in Asia
 Latin America And Africa
 where the soil and the landscape look like a cement slab
 where huts scatter
 like the remaining limbs of a body plagued with leprosy
 and rain water takes the soil and huts away
 where the sun, merciless
 beats and pounds the head
 here
 in the backyard of time
 where people wait and wait and wait
 and time
 like pain, will not go away
 multitudes stare with eyes as many as stars. (Ibid, 19)

Here, the notion of betrayal of the suffering masses by natural phenomena which characterises the first two volumes of the oeuvre is revisited while the physical and psychological effects of suffering are captured with sensitivity and vividness.

The culpability of Capitalism is traced to the system of slavery in FLS (1997) where the speaker states:

remember
 whose child it was they took
 a virgin
 they perched her on a ship, like reams of steel
 to slavery
 they chose her among the population like people choosing jewellery

 whose child was it. (FLS, 31)

In TWE (1992) that ancient system of greed culminates into "interests" under whose rubric the modern leaders of Capitalism, the United States, conduct destructive wars against smaller countries as was the case in Iraq (3) and Vietnam in 1968. Thus, his definition of this notion of "interests" exposes its hidden material foundation:

interest
 what is it
 my friends, what is it that is interest
 a diamond which cannot be crushed
 or gold ...
 is that what we have made of interest
 interest
 what is that - ...
 but greed and hatred. (TWE, 3)

Interestingly, it is not only the powerful leaders of the Capitalist world who bear responsibility for the deprivation of the poor but also surrogates like the notorious homeland leaders (FLS, 4 - 6), sellouts (CHWM, 2,) as well as the communist leaders of the Eastern bloc (TWE, 34).

However, there is a contradiction which betrays Serote's ambivalent socialist leanings when he blames spies for the fall of the Eastern bloc in a language which regrets that historic event even though he had already displayed a clear understanding of the excesses of the Communist regimes in the reference to Pol Pot (3) in the opening pages of TWE. It becomes more confusing when these same "spies" are portrayed as the instigators of the violence in the townships and slums of South Africa and the Third World in general as implicit in TWE (29 -

31). Contradictions in these later volumes become more acute if we compare the socio-materialist analysis which dominates the volumes written in exile with the obsession with and appeal to the innate goodness of human beings which echoes throughout these later volumes.

It is therefore not surprising that the shift which occurred when the ANC was faced with the formidable task of uniting a torn, warring nation and compelled to stray from its traditional class-based social analysis is also notable in the poet's discourse. Thus, the material basis of the escalating conflict is ignored and the conflict is countered with an appeal to the essential humanism of human beings which manifests in the goodness of appreciating "the simple things in life" and the "respect" for human life which are the central themes of TWE (1992). Consequently, against the contemporary explosion of violence Serote poses the romantic example of "good men" and the implication is that the rest of the population should take a cue from them:

they wear tired eyes
 they search and look
 for what we can share
 or for that moment which can make life magic
 for that simple thing ...
 they are black they are white
 they share the earth with us
 and their hearts are not steel
 or gold
 or stone
 but are simple - flesh!
 they are boers and blacks
 women or men. (TWE: 1992, 5)

Even the divisions within society in general and blacks in particular are subsequently downplayed in CHWM (1994) as antagonistic sections of the population are rallied behind the call for peace:

we do not want a civil war
 ah
 i call the preacherman
 the medicineman and woman
 the bones
 the indunaman and the baas
 i call the traindriver and taxidriver
 who have seen life speed on their wheels to death
 i call the chief
 i call the traditionalman and woman
 i call witchcraft and the boere ...
 let us return to life
 though it is made cheap in our dwellings
 because we hire us to kill us. (CHWM, 8)

Similarly, the basic social contradictions between the worker and the capitalist are overlooked with the understanding that violence affects all equally:

we must return to the labourer and the youth
 the farmhand and the domestic servant
 to the intellectual
 it is to them that civil war will happen ...
 we must return ...
 to the song of the street digger and migrant labourer
 we must return to the businessman
 and the hostel dweller and we must say life must be lived. (Ibid, 9)

Appropriate as it is in terms of rhetoric and contextual significance, the analysis of the situation offered at this juncture in the oeuvre problematically borders on the reactionary and neither captures the complexity nor intervenes on behalf of the revolutionary masses as was the case in the middle part of the oeuvre. For instance, even though a contextual understanding of the uprising of 1985 is still residual in TWE (2), the statements made in support of the youth of 1985 in A Tough Tale (1987) are retracted in CHWM (1992) where regret and finger-pointing is implicit in his statement:

when our children played with mud dolls
 and came to spit in our faces

and invented the necklace
 and stunned us with burning people alive
 clubbing them in the view of the whole world to see
 when with anger they took to the streets
 with impunity
 they bought life with death
 as they rendered life more cheap than dirty water
 it was in the township and in the village
 from where the smell of burning flesh came
 we could then have sung
 flesh is burning
 flesh is burning
 flesh is burning
 but we buried the dead
 we nurtured the maimed
 we promised freedom to the dead and the maimed
 we asked for sacrifice. (CHWM, 15 -16)

The poet's analysis fails to go deeper than the surface in his search for the authentic character of the crisis which is elusive to him.

In a bold attempt to explain this elusive complexity of the causes of the violence of the 90s in their paper, "The disintegration of Apartheid: From Violence to Reconstruction" which appears in South African Review 6: From "Red Friday" to CODESA (1992), (from which I would like to take a lengthy quote), Mike Morris and Doug Hindson maintain:

The roots of the violence should be sought in the effects of the disintegration of apartheid rather than its implementation. They are located not only in divisions within the black population, but also in the divisions of the society at large. Because of the spatial distribution of power in the city, the wealthier classes and groups are able to displace the struggle for residential space and resources into peripheries where land allocation and control is weak, either due to apartheid's legacy as in the black townships) or the weak property relations (tribal areas and squatter camps near the metropolises). The local state has ensured that resources continue to be supplied to white and, increasingly, coloured and Indian areas. As a result, conflict over resources has been deflected, displaced and confined to the black areas. Instead of the conflict taking place over the distribution of resources generally, it is taking place over the marginal resources left over for black residential areas whose inhabitants are rapidly increasing. Racial, ethnic and class antagonisms held in check under classic apartheid have resurfaced in the climate of liberalisation and deracialisation. ... the gradual erosion of apartheid institutions and the abandonment of its policies has led to an escalation of social tensions and

increased, not decreased, violence throughout the country. ... Often-violent conflict between contending political organisations and ideologies within the urban black population, has been accompanied by antagonisms within particular residential communities ... (1992: 155 - 156)

Although sociological in essence, this argument offers a broader, more sensible approach to the understanding of contemporary violence in South Africa than the emphasis on the "loss of humanity" explanation offered in TWE (1992) coupled with the supposedly remedial appeal for the return "to the rainbow of our land / this nation of shimmering colours and shades" (CHWM: 1994, 14).

One of the trademarks of Serote's poetry is the passion with which he remembers martyrs of the struggle and his fallen comrades. Thus, when the day which had been reluctant to crack finally dawned he took time to pay tribute to these fellow fighters in order to keep them eternally alive in the memory of the new nation. The child which had been refusing to be born in the previous books ultimately sees the sun and the poet acknowledges the positive role of these matures in making that birth possible. However, this long awaited and hard earned event is immediately threatened by the catastrophic violence which grips the country and it is for this reason that he pleads in CHWM (1994):

let us pause
 we have been thrashed and pounded
 we have been between the anvil and the heat
 but we have now with great pain and red blood
 we have i say
 the child
 it must not die in our hands
 i ask
 may the child know
 and sing
 and dream
 and grow and walk and sing like a bird. (CHWM, 18 - 19)

It is to the memory of the fallen comrades that this new-born child is dedicated.

The list of comrades who died in the struggle is endless, it includes close friends who are mentioned by name, ancient tribes who resisted colonial conquest, heroic individuals and groups of people who paid the ultimate price for their love of freedom. In FLS (1997) the elegiac epic begins with the celebration of the birth of the Eastern Cape in the area where the first sustained resistance wars took place and produced legendary heroes like Makana, Hintsa, Maqoma and others:

here
 in Mkanaland in the land of Mqhayi
 in the hills of warriors who fought wars
 who with fierce anger and courage ...
 held with bare hands this history ...
 they intervened
 in life and blood ...
 these African men and women
 they hurled themselves into time
 into history which was rattling. (FLS, 7)

The fate of these ancient heroes of the struggle is conspicuously seen in the context of the general African struggles against conquest and modern struggles are properly understood as continuations thereof. Thus, the deaths of Cabral, Neto, Mondlane, Lumumba, Hani, Moyo, Make, Nkrumah, Machel, Tongogara, Kotane, Marks, and many others, are not losses to isolated struggles but, rather, losses to related parts of a whole, single struggle against the colonisation of Africa.

The tribute to his close friends and comrades with whom he spent time in exile is touching, deeply felt and very powerful in FLS (1997). Albeit painful, as it brings memories of sorrow, it is his way of bidding farewell to and carving eternal monuments for them as he explains:

i am witness and will be witness
 i keep the house and the record of ages
 and must tell the truth

even when it screams like a pig crushed with a hammer
 i must say since time, since circumstance
 and since moments did not prepare me
 or allow me
 to say goodbye to my friends
 when other people can do. (FLS, 14)

The memory of these comrades, many of whom died under tragic circumstances far away from their places of birth evoke deep thoughts about the essence of life and death in the poet and his conclusion is enlightening and didactic:

it is then these which make men and women
 they will not just disappear
 for men and women
 are not just of semen only
 or ovaries
 they are also of love
 they are not made of dirt only
 or bones
 or sinews
 they are of spirits which is like the wind
 mind them
 when you touch them
 when you hurt them
 when you kill them
 when you are unkind to them
 when you are cruel to them
 mind them
 they will live in you
 and you in them. (Ibid, 13)

The love which bonds him to his friends is so deep that he parallels it to his attachment to life in the lament for the cadres Jabu and Fikile, his wife:

Jabu and Fikile my friends
 here we are apart now
 and now and then i think about you
 and miss you
 and discover that the way i miss you
 is the way i would miss life when i am dead. (FLS, 10)

It is to the testing conditions of life and death as combatants that these friendships owe their

immortality as he points in the elegy for Vusi:

on a gravel Angolan path
 past the baobab tree
 and the palm tree
 and the cold winter morning
 Vusi and i struck
 in sweat and muscle and iron will
 a comraderie. (Ibid, 15)

On the surface, the lament for Thabo and Dikeledi recalls the brutality of apartheid assassins, but underneath it is a subtle celebration of the power with which love flourishes under difficult circumstances. The gruesome manner of their death is ultimately countered by the powerful symbolism of their togetherness at the moment of their death and thus denies any sense of triumph to the murderers.

The death of Tebello, the son of Alexandra who lies buried in a London graveyard (Ibid, 22), dramatises the painful, lonely, final moments just before death about which the poet ruminates in depth. After the lament for Tebello, he explains his fascination with these final moments:

i have been here
 looking and hearing
 understanding
 and speaking
 of the loneliness of some of my friends ...
 their loneliness in death
 with no one to talk to them
 with no one to touch them ...
 their loneliness was eerie ...
 their loneliness was eerie when they needed a hand to hold. (Ibid, 23)

The poet's final message to these fallen martyrs highlights his sentimental concern for the pain they must have suffered:

aloneness is like a malignant pain
 it aches and aches and aches
 this thing is so sad
 so sad ...
 i say to Duma
 Cassius and Chris
 Vusi
 remember, we remember you in loneliness at that moment of parting. (Ibid, 25-26)

Perhaps the most remarkable lines in FLS (1997) are those dedicated to the poet's search for the meaning of freedom. This song of freedom, appropriately dedicated to the late Oliver Tambo who led the ANC throughout the dark decades of exile, depicts the poet in a thoughtful mood. Now as the poet walks the street of Cape Town in the aftermath of the 1994 elections he muses about the nature of freedom:

i think
 freedom, oh freedom
 what's your name whose child are you
 where do you come from
 which alley. (Ibid, 26)

Interestingly, it is the sacrifices of those who died in the struggle which made freedom possible as he acknowledges:

i think of the dead for maybe now i am free
 they
 they freed me in blood ...
 i think of them
 of their death
 everytime i hear the word freedom ...
 they are the shadow of this large thing ...
 this colossal matter which they died for ...
 they are the guardian of this thing
 freedom. (Ibid, 54 - 55)

Significantly, his thoughts about freedom encompass the whole African continent

which, although supposedly free, is witness to the most inhuman deprivations for which he laments:

oh Africa
 where in Angola the people live with missing limbs
 in Uganda the children it is said are orphans
 Africa
 in Somalia the vultures wait for the child to die
 in Ethiopia where famine devours life, freedom is perched in the sand particles
 in Zimbabwe where the peasants despair from want of land
 in Mozambique
 in Namibia
 in Tanzania
 come and see ...
 come you and i who talk about freedom
 and find it
 here. (Ibid, 58)

This absence of freedom in Africa is symbolically linked to the advent of colonial conquest for, according to the poet, freedom "passed here once many centuries ago / it forgot to come to us" (Ibid, 62). Thus, he coaxes it to repeat itself like the cycle of history and come back to where it once resided (Ibid, 62 - 63). Underlying this cyclic notion of freedom and history however, is the profound understanding of the significance of human intervention in order to steer the wheel of history to the desired direction and thus to transform that cyclic character to linearity.

It is with this understanding that although he recognises the fragility and transience of freedom, his emphasis on hard work and insistence on reconstruction give significant impetus to the possibility of making freedom real and everlasting to the people:

what is freedom
 it is said
 if we build the house
 and bring the electricity from the wind
 if we conquer disease
 and defeat poverty

if we brought water
and built the road
is that freedom
would we rest in peace in our grave. (Ibid, 59)

Thus, the significance of freedom for the poet rests not in the ideal but in the functional realisation thereof in the lives of the ordinary people that it must transform for the better. His definition of freedom captures this empowering essence magnificently:

it is to let go
to pull the grassroots
to uproot the grassroots
to let them soar and fly in grace in space
so
they speak
they stand on their own
they take
they free themselves for all of us. (Ibid, 60)

One of the most significant features in Serote's oeuvre is the ability and ease with which he moves with the texture of the struggle. From the early days of Black Consciousness to the current transition from apartheid we witness a remarkable conscious attempt to internalise the fundamentally political demands of the contemporary historical situation on his part. Throughout, he positively tries to bring art close to the oppressed masses through his use of simple language and through his reflection of their most significant experience, their socio-political experience.

Serote's literature is a direct response to the twin forces of apartheid and industrialisation. In Serote, art acquires the critical functional element in the service of mass struggle, it ceases to be an individualistic project free from social compulsion. As such, the black experience he explores, portrays and interrogates with so much determination is the totality of individual, local and national problems to which the struggles of blacks are directed, hence the overlap between class and national questions. The dominance of the urban

landscape, images and themes clearly attest to Serote's urban bias although the images of peasant life that can be glimpsed at some points in the literature display his sensitivity to and understanding of the importance of the rural issues in the national question.

From the generalised "protest" themes of the early works which explored 'black experience' in accordance with BC agitation the oeuvre becomes more overtly political in the early middle phase although the poet's major subject is still the struggle in general. In the latter stage we can roughly group the pre-exile books; NBMW (1975), BMF (1978), TEBIB (1981). The notable change from first person singular "I" to the plural "We" and a greater concern with collective rather than individual issues marks this development.

However, since the first book written in exile in Botswana we have witnessed a subtle replacement of the 'struggle' with the ANC as the subject. At this time the poet was also establishing himself as an official of the ANC and therefore we witness the consequences of the domination of artistic production or even (in)direct censorship thereof by the organisational discipline. Consequently, by the time his FLS (1997) was published he had already established his position as the Party Member of Parliament and the foremost Party "praise-singer". Underneath this trend is an attempt to escape from the confines of nationalism by expanding the focus to other areas of the world in the later phase. This attempt is, however, undermined by the blurring of social differences - compelled by the official discourse of reconciliation - on which the analysis is based. It is clear though that with his political involvement, his radical insistence on skilful portrayal of the rhythm of the South African revolution from the inside uniquely captures the essence of commitment that fundamentally resides in the correlation between writing and action, the arts which Serote has mastered.

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Index

- Abrams, Lionel 24, 37
- Abrahams, Peter 41, 109
- Achebe, Chinua 174
- Alexandra 20, 21, 45, 46, 73, 84, 137
- ANC 10, 17, 23, 27, 31, 32, 63, 94, 98, 108, 121, 144, 166, 175, 182, 189, 192
- Asvat, Farouk 10
- Atwell, David 11
- Bakara, Amiri 26
- Baldwin, James 26
- Barboure, Doriane 110, 119
- BC 16, 17, 23, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 53, 56, 61, 66, 76, 77, 78, 80, 84, 108, 109, 113, 119, 121, 147, 191, 192, 193
- Benda, Julien 13
- Bhabha, Homi 15, 180
- Biko, Steve 6, 23, 24, 28, 167
- Blanco, Hugo 8
- Botswana 9, 27, 141, 144, 193
- Brecht, Bertolt 3
- Brown, Duncan 11
- Cabral, A. 26
- Cape Town 32, 178, 189
- Citashe, I. W. W. 3, 7

Chapman, Michael 21, 66, 85

Coetzee, J. M. 109

Cooper , Brenda 130, 131

Cosaw 11

Couzens, Tim 42, 44

De Klerk, F. W. 174, 175

Dlomo, H. I. E. 41, 66, 67

Drum 33, 34, 35, 37

Fanon, Franz 5, 14, 15, 26

Finnegan, R 43, 44, 67

Giddens, A 116

Gqoba, W. 36, 41

Gordimer, N. Gwala, Mafika 42

Gramsci, Antonio 13

Harlow, B. 5, 7, 8

Imbongi 44, 67, 80, 123

Johannesburg 20, 54

Kgotsisile, K. 9

Kuhn, Joy 22

Leshoai, B. 66

Lesotho 21

Lodge, T. 121

Magubane, P. 22

Malan, R. 47

Malcom X 144

Mandela, N. 31

Mandela, W. 22

Manganyi, N. C. 34

Mattera, Don 35, 61

Matthews, J. 35, 41

Maughan-Brown, David 41

Mbeki, T. 31

Mnyele, T. 24, 27, 29, 37, 38, 144, 145, 152

Morris, D. 184

Mphahlele, E. 34, 35, 41

Mqhayi, S. E. K. 37, 41, 186

Mtshali, M. 24, 34, 37, 38, 39

Mutloatse, M. 16

Mzamane, M. 28, 29, 30, 43, 45, 46

Nakasa, N. 33, 45

Ndebele, N. 11, 12

Ngugi wa Thiongo 6

Ngozi, Mankunku 37, 38, 57

Opland, J. 44

PAC 32, 94, 174

Parry, B 11, 12

Pechey, G 5, 7

Plaatje, Sol 41, 109

Press, K 9, 10, 17

Sachs, A. 11

Said, E. 7, 13, 14, 15, 142, 180

Sanchez, S. 26

SASO 23, 27

Senghor, L, S. 42

Sepamla, S. 28

Seroke, J. 23, 24

Serote, M. W. 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 34, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 52, 53, 63, 65, 67, 71, 74, 79, 82, 84, 88, 108, 110, 111, 112, 113, 118, 122, 129, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 161, 175, 178, 180, 181, 182, 185, 191, 192

Shakespeare, W. 64, 69

Sharpeville 32, 33, 36, 108, 113, 117, 120, 165

Skinner, D. R. 11

Soga, T. 36

Sole, K. 11, 17, 108, 111, 112, 114

Soweto 16, 21, 30, 84, 165, 167

Themba, Can 34, 41

Tiro, O. 84

Tlali, M. 28

Trotsky, L. 59

UDF 9, 10, 175

U. S. 25, 26, 27, 77, 142, 143, 144, 166, 181

Verwoed, H. F. 21

Visser, N. 2, 109, 110, 111, 113, 122

Watts, J. 35, 36, 42, 43, 45

Wauchope 41

Wilkinson, J. 21, 23, 26, 27, 53, 54, 143, 147

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