

**'DECOLONISING THE MIND';**  
**THE CHALLENGE OF**  
**MTUTUZELI MATSHOBA'S TEXTS.**

by

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## **Declaration**

This study represents original work by the author and has not been submitted in any form to another university. When use was made of the works of others it has been acknowledged in the text.

## Abstract

This study examines the works of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, who was born of Xhosa parents in Soweto in 1950. Matshoba's published work has been given some recognition in academic circles. *Call Me Not a Man*, his collection of short stories, was awarded the Olive Schreiner prize for fiction in 1981 by the English Academy of Southern Africa. However, like those of so many black writers, his writings are not generally prescribed for study in university courses.

The main purpose of the thesis is to suggest that the texts of writers who have been marginalized by the dominant cultural practice should be considered from a new perspective, a perspective which employs criteria other than those used in traditional Anglo-American methods of analysis. These criteria would stem from the demands of the works themselves and would recognize factors such as historical context, the influence of the oral tradition, and African philosophical concepts.

In an analysis of Matshoba's unpublished autobiography, which is influenced by fictional conventions, I explore a theory propounded by various commentators: that a comparative study of Afro-American writing, especially slave narrative, with black South African writing might lend added insight into South African works. A shared history of oppression is seen to provide a 'cultural imperative' which prompts black artists to seek a voice which is 'indelibly black', and to claim an identity that has hitherto been denied them in the dominant culture.

The final chapter deals with Matshoba's drama, screenplay, and video productions. Matshoba feels that the most effective way to reach an audience which will include those of his people who are not yet literate is through audio-visual media. I suggest, in the light of this, that the wider dissemination of artistic productions which have popular appeal (made possible by film) may provide the greatest challenge to the ruling practices in academic institutions.



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## INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades South African universities increasingly have acknowledged it to be imperative that work by South African writers be incorporated into their English syllabuses. However, these syllabuses are still dominated by material drawn from the 'English canon'. One of the reasons for this is that academics and critics appraise literature using what may conveniently be called Western standards of evaluation and find that most African works do not seem to meet these criteria. Under the influence of critics such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, and E.M. Forster, criteria such as 'a well-made plot', linear development, 'well-rounded' characters, complexity, coherence, maintenance of the illusion, unity of impression (in the short story), and so on, have become accepted as features necessary for a written work to qualify as 'good literature', and have been retained as measures of acceptability in the selection of works for study in educational institutions.

This study proposes to examine the works of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, a 'black' South African writer, writing in English, who is acclaimed mainly by black readers. Although he has been granted some acknowledgement by academic critics, especially in his having been awarded the 1981 Olive Schreiner prize by the English Academy of Southern Africa, he is considered by other critics, both black and white, to have severe limitations. I hope to show that these apparent weaknesses, to which I will refer in the course of examining his work, are not necessarily limitations, but can be regarded as an indication of the author's creative response to the difficult socio-political situation of his immediate surroundings in Soweto, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, I shall suggest that what some see as weaknesses can be seen also as vital to both the moral and aesthetic understanding and appreciation of his work. Although I shall be looking at Matshoba in particular, the study will also offer methods and criteria which might be applied more generally in the study of contemporary 'black writing' in South Africa.

The terms 'black writing', and 'black critic' are considered by some to be either offensive or divisive. In using such categories, however, I shall not be perpetuating racial differences; rather, I aim to follow the example of writers and critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker Jr., Es'kia Mphahlele and Njabulo S. Ndebele, who, motivated by persistent allegations of the black person's *absence* from literary practice in white-dominated institutions, acknowledge the necessity of protesting a *presence* that is, in the words of Richard Farris Thompson, 'indelibly

black' (cited in Gates, 1989: 31).

Before approaching Matshoba's work, I need to explain my own position and its limitations. As a white academic, I have been taught to have certain literary expectations and to teach syllabuses based on the Western criteria I have sketched above. In this study I hope to turn a self-critical eye on myself: to 'deconstruct' my own training and assumptions and in the process to 'decolonise my mind' by recognizing value in works hitherto considered as being 'not up to standard' and therefore unworthy of inclusion in the syllabuses of most departments of English in this country. As I am suggesting, my own discourse is not ideologically innocent, and I realize that, although I can attempt to 'decolonise my mind', I can never attain a completely objective position. Aside from considerations of literary bias, I inevitably approach the social, cultural, and political content of the works from the contradictory position of the white academic who, although working in a black university (Vista, in Soweto), is situated within the hegemonic structure of white-dominated educational and literary practice in South Africa. As Abdul JanMohammed notes in his wider discussion of racial difference in colonialist society and literature:

The dominant model of power and interest-relations, in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native... The power relations underlying this model set in motion such strong currents that even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperial exploitation... is easily seduced by colonial privileges and profits and forced by various ideological factors to conform to the prevailing racial and cultural pre-conceptions. Thus the 'author-function' in such texts is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses.

1985: 63.

In spite of my being 'historically' caught up in these difficulties, I feel that my approach is important, for I believe that Matshoba's writing has democratic and radical potential that can help me, and others like me, to break the stranglehold of the ideologies that dominate literary education in this country. In examining my own 'blindspots' as a critic, I intend ultimately to 'reconstruct' aspects of the black text. Such reconstructive practices are, I think, necessary. As

black writers are obviously influenced by dominating literary expectations in their societies, they are likely to be influenced by some 'Western' assumptions such as logocentrism, dualism, a mimetic structure of events, and solid character presentation. We may think in consequence that, in reading someone like Matshoba, we recognize a master narrative that aligns itself with typically European realist texts. At the same time, we may feel vaguely disappointed that the writer, in trying to 'convey in a language not one's own the spirit that is one's own', has not quite mastered the forms s/he is attempting to use. Instead of accepting such a diagnosis, I wish to find in these 'flaws' opportunities which, in the case of many black writers, do not so much *undermine* the apparent master narrative as *extend* it by revealing the 'textuality of the text' (Derrida, 1980: xlix), in terms of which the literary text is seen as being indissolubly linked to the 'text' of the author's real-life experiences. Accordingly, the writer's expression could show itself to be 'subversive' in relation to that of writers established within literary classifications (Barthes, 1977: 74). As Graham Huggan says:

The now outdated formula that post-colonial writing involves the adaption of 'European' forms' to a 'non-European' content has thankfully lost credence due to the recognition both of its tacit reinforcement of European assumptions of cultural leadership and its theoretically untenable bifurcation between the formal and thematic properties of the literary text.

1989: 27.

As a result of the conjunction of 'European' forms and so-called 'non European' content, certain disjunctions may arise in these narratives causing Western-trained critics to discern what they consider to be 'faults'. By a shift of assumption and perspective, however, faults may be seen as the 'stress points' of new understanding.

I shall be using the expression 'decolonise the mind' slightly differently to the way in which Ngugi wa Thiong'o uses it. He was appealing to black Africans to cleanse their minds of the influence of colonialism, and suggested that the only authentic way to accomplish this is by a return to the vernacular, which is what he has done in his recent works in Gikuyu. He feels that the African 'reality' cannot truly be evoked in the colonial languages. Some South African writers I have consulted on this issue, including Es'kia Mphahlele, Sipho Sepamla and Maishe Maponya, feel that his view is not practicable, especially in South Africa with its diverse

language groups. They are confident that they can use English in order to portray effectively their African experience. (We need to remember that in South Africa English has not had the official sanction that Afrikaans has enjoyed as the language of the ruling national body and hence, from the black perspective, as the language of 'Apartheid'.)

On the question of 'Western approaches' one needs to ask oneself whether it is possible to read a writer like Matshoba in a way that can result in a critical response germane to his local genesis and significance. Currently post-structuralism enjoys centrality in Western academic circles; yet post-structuralism's critique of the 'centred subject' has for some African and Feminist critics seemed to deflect attention from a historically specific, culturally grounded criticism. Wole Soyinka considers this imposition as a 'second epoch of colonization':

We...have been blandly invited to submit  
ourselves to a second epoch of colonialization...  
this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction  
defined and conditioned by individuals whose  
theories and prescriptions are derived from the  
apprehension of *their* world and *their* history,  
*their* social neuroses and *their* value systems.  
1976: xii.

In similar vein, Diana Brydon claims: 'We [women] were marginal to the old critical approaches and we are marginal to the new' (1989: 1), and Nancy Hartsock requests a practical demonstration to prove the efficacy of the 'new' theories:

Those of us who are not part of the ruling race  
class, or gender, not a part of the minority which  
controls our world, need to know how it works.  
Why are we - in all our variousness -  
systematically excluded and marginalized?  
1987: 190-191.

These critics would claim that the suspension of the referent in the literary sign and the 'crisis of representation' have effected, in post-structuralist theory, a retreat from geography and history into a domain of pure 'textuality', in which the principle of determinacy denies the possibility of social or political 'significance' for literature.

Barbara Johnson explains, however, that Derrida's statement, 'there is nothing outside the text', is now recognized not to exclude social materiality:

It is the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another which such a critical insight would call down, not the claims of social consciousness or the recognition of the inflections of power in how literary meaning is produced and circulated.

1980: 5.

Post-structuralist theory has certainly offered post-colonial criticism a mechanism for deconstructing colonial works in order to locate the presence of subversive inquiries, of transgressions of authority, and to demonstrate how colonialism depends on such presences within the field of its power. At the same time, such a theoretical preference - I am arguing - has drawn harsh criticism from scholars who attempt to speak on behalf of historically subordinated people. Another such critic is Caroline Porter, who questions the implicit politics of any reading strategy which seeks to position resistance as already present within the domain of power (1988: 743):

Rather than arriving at a material critical practice which locates the 'literary' as a culturally significant dimension within the specifics of history and geography, this particular manifestation of 'theory' transports colonialist 'history' and post-colonial 'society' directly into the theatre of the unrelievedly 'literary', where they function simply as semiotic figures, rhetorical presences in an endlessly self-disclosing text.

1988: 780.

In similar vein, Benita Parry argues that although deconstructive work on the discourse of colonialism has succeeded in reversing an implicit collusion between criticism and colonial power, its necessary privileging of the colonial text as the object of critical attention amounts, discursively, to an erasure of the anti-colonialist 'native' voice, and a limiting of the possibility of 'native' resistance (1987: 34). The claim of these critics is that deconstruction and new-historicist theoretical practice, in their concentration on anti-colonialism, tend to ignore the social field - in which are to be found 'native' voices - as an extra-textual area of struggle. Walter Ong (1981) has demonstrated, for instance, how the thought and speech patterns of cultures which are predominantly oral differ from those of highly literate cultures. Such 'oral residue'

has an unconscious effect on the style and content of the works of black writers, and can be recognized by critics who are prepared to suspend their inherited perspectives in order to see the social significance in this writing. Acknowledging the limits of European-derived theory, I shall be seeking to foreground the marginalized voices of the subordinated person. I am aware that, in contrast to the post-structuralist decentring of subjects, I shall be reinstating a form of intentionality in the production of textual meaning. I hope to show that such recuperation is located not simply in the name of the 'author', but in an anterior, though not determining, cultural dimension, a process described by Stephen Slemon as

a grounding of post-colonial representation in an  
on-going cultural refiguration of the various  
inheritances, traditions, cultural memories...  
which make up the post-colonised world.

1989: xviii.

My own experience of Matshoba's work has encouraged me to treat his stories as representative of a kind of writing by black South Africans that is not easily assimilable into an English canon and which, in consequence, presents mainstream academic criticism with some difficulties of adjustment. My own initial response to his stories was mixed: I was moved by the descriptions of the life of a community I know but do not share, but the dialogue seemed unconvincing and failed to develop the characters as individuals. A lack of attention to detail proved disconcerting, particularly in the writer's use of ungrammatical Afrikaans; not as in colloquial registers, but in constructions foreign to any speaker of Afrikaans. Similarly, I recorded a use of cliché, and reacted against Matshoba's agonistic tone and what seemed lapses into florid metaphor. Turning to the reviews by white critics I found my initial impressions confirmed. Lionel Abrahams accused Matshoba of being 'concerned less with art than with relevance', of 'stating instead of implying', and of resorting to 'caricature'. The 'characters are not bodied forth', 'the narrative lacks pace', and 'commentary is opinionative', he said, advising Matshoba to 'resist the colourations of prejudice' (*Rand Daily Mail* 79/09/27). According to Anthony Egan

A major fault in these stories lies in Matshoba's  
dialogue. Long, sometimes complex, political and  
polemical speeches seem out of place with the  
characters he creates, resulting in the feeling  
that the author is speaking as himself through his

characters, rather than in character with their personalities and backgrounds.

*The Argus* 85/06/27.

In spite of such negative judgements, *Call Me Not a Man* was awarded the Olive Schreiner prize for fiction. One could ask whether this constituted a genuine recognition for the merits of the collection. If so, one is tempted to ask why those who made the award - all academics - have not included Matshoba's short stories in their own university syllabuses? My suspicion is that the award was made as something of a gesture rather than as a reward for writing that could be considered suitable, say, for study in the university lecture room. At the same time, several black journalists and readers acclaimed Matshoba's stories. As we shall see when I list a range of responses, however, there is no consensus of opinion among black critics on evaluative criteria. Despite persistent disagreements about his stories, I have come to appreciate the writings of Matshoba (as well as the writings of other black writers) in a way that would have been impossible for me a few years back. In part, this is due to my own increased involvement in the social life of Soweto: this has led me to a greater understanding of the context in which the stories are produced, as well as to an increasing familiarity with the speech patterns of the community which is the recurrent subject of the stories. As a result of my interest, I have also got to know Mtutuzeli Matshoba and was, thus, fortunate enough to be given access to his unpublished works.

Matshoba's collection of short stories, *Call Me Not a Man*, was published in 1979. (Since then one of the stories, 'A Glimpse of Slavery', has inspired a film by Kenneth Kaplan titled *Hidden Farms*.) Matshoba has also published a play *Seeds of War* (1981); at the Market Theatre he has read an unpublished play, *The Devil's Payoff*, which he is revising for film; he completed an as yet unpublished novel or autobiography, *Beyond the Minedumps*, in 1989, and in 1991 his screenplay, *Menacing Shadows*, was filmed by the German Film Academy. He has acted in a video film, *Apartheid's Children*, produced by the United States Information Service for American television but banned in South Africa, and he has acted in a video film, *The Mohale Str. Brothers*, which is a story of his family made by Michael Hamman of West Germany. Matshoba also paints scenes of Soweto in oils, some of which have been displayed in the Market gallery. These excursions into visual media will also be considered in the light of the feeling of some black critics that the most suitable medium for the expression of the African experience



would be film.

I shall begin by looking at Matshoba's collection of short stories. Thereafter I shall examine his unpublished novel prior to offering concluding remarks on his plays and films. In the course of the study I will trace Matshoba's development over a ten-year period and consider his use of four different genres. Through an analysis of his work I wish to engage in a dialectical enterprise in which the reader, the writer, and the critic are all involved in a task of unravelling how the meanings they themselves produce emerge from the readings of the stories. My aim is to subject 'marginalised' kinds of storytelling to a reading practice that speaks directly to geographically, culturally, and economically marginalised people themselves. Black South African writing is necessarily marked by the inscriptions of dominant Western critical practice and its technologies of interpretation and control, but it is also infused with the influences of African philosophical and cultural traditions which, I hope to show, can - if recognized - open the post-colonial reader to '*another* realm of semiotic "meaning", *another* ground of interpretive community' (Slemon and Tiffen, 1989: xxi).

## Chapter One

### Short Stories: Call Me Not a Man

The stories in *Call Me Not a Man* originally appeared separately in *Staffrider* magazine. The collection was published in 1979, deemed politically radical and banned a month later. The specific reason given by the Directorate of Publications was that Matshoba's depiction of white officials, especially policemen, was insulting. The book was eventually unbanned on appeal, and had a mixed reception. As I noted earlier, reviewers in 'black' newspapers mostly gave unqualified praise to the stories, as did Alan Paton, who remarked that:

...for me the acid test of a story is its power to entertain and hold and even enthrall the reader. Much polemical story-writing fails this test. Mr Matshoba passes this test because of his narrative gift...These are among the best South African short stories that I have read in a long time. What do I wish for the writer? I wish that his narrative gift should never lose its supremacy over the didactic and polemical.

*The Argus* 79/11/6.

There were, however, dissenting voices. The critics Njabulo S. Ndebele and Lewis Nkosi have been scathing generally in their criticism of South African black writing. Ndebele is disturbed by the fact that 'writers in the cities seem to be clear about one thing: that their writings should show of themselves and their writers, a commitment to political engagement' (1984a : 43). In this vein, he writes of Matshoba:

I have also found Mtutuzeli Matshoba's depiction of social reality in his stories simply too overwhelming. His basic technique has been to accumulate fact after fact of oppression and suffering, so that we are in the end almost totally grounded in this reality without being offered, at the same time, an opportunity for aesthetic and critical estrangement.

1984a: 46.

Another black academic, Es'kia Mphahlele, is equally derogatory:

Writers like Mtutuzeli [Matshoba] feel called upon to range their words against the oppressor. They

resist that intrinsic tendency for words to weave themselves into metaphor and allegory to express high seriousness in a memorable diction, and prefer a prose that goes straight to the visible target. Maybe they know no other way. The writing displays the spontaneity of unrefined oral expression, which is closer to the heart, to a state of mind, than the written word that has to earn its candidacy...

It is at once a response to the immediate, to the instant, and a direct, urgent confrontation with the dominant political morality. The dramatization of the message is the major concern. The intention to *make* literature is either ignored or subdued. I mean literature in the sense in which we speak of a process of tradition and refinement, a memorable act of language with transcendental possibilities. Literature as a compulsive cultural act, an act of self-knowledge, claims most of the writer's energy. Self-knowledge is a process that seeks to affirm an identity...

...while you extend your cultural being, and seek to know yourself, you have to express powerful feelings in powerful words (*powerful* also meaning *beautiful*), explore and establish perspective.

1983: 6-7.

In their emphasis on 'tradition', 'refinement', and 'beauty', Mphahlele's words reveal the strong influence that Western literary and critical thinking have had on his training as a critic.

In 'white' newspapers, reviewers qualified their praise with some severe criticism. Nevertheless, an all-white panel of adjudicators (appointed by the English Academy) awarded the collection the Olive Schreiner prize in 1981. According to the presentation address, this was in acknowledgement of Matshoba's 'authenticity' in his telling of black experience in the 1970s. The point is: the collection provoked a diversity of reactions, and before turning to the stories, it might be worth recording several more of the responses.

Although acknowledging Matshoba's 'fine descriptive powers and eloquent command of language', Lionel Abrahams considered that the stories 'disregard a number of the rules for effective fiction', such as the need for

- narrative economy
- subjugation of material to form
- integrity of the illusion
- objectivity in presentation of characters.

'They appear', he said, 'to provide the model for "non-elitist" committed fiction prescribed by radical critics against traditional "liberal" or "bourgeois" literature' (*Rand Daily Mail* 79/01/01). Anthony Egan, whose criticisms I quoted in the Introduction, thought the 'most likely reason why this book was banned initially is Matshoba's description of whites. Most of them are a caricature of uncouth, tyrannical "little men" who are indulging their own frustrations with life by being unpleasant to blacks'. Leon de Kock found what he called 'dreary plotlessness', 'formlessness' and 'smug and unoriginal political thinking' to be 'irksome and boring':

Whereas Can Themba...worked at creating an 'art' of storytelling, such considerations are superfluous to a writer like Matshoba. His stance is committedly anti-capitalist...The stories are written on the assumption that the reader shares their revolutionary spirit, and Matshoba couldn't give a hoot for delicate sensibilities that are immune to 'politics' in literature.

1986: 63.

Applying criteria from a materialist perspective, Mike Vaughan provided a very different, though still fairly negative view:

[Although] Matshoba breaks with the aesthetics of liberalism in his concern to produce a fiction closely in touch with popular experience...some features...seem to reflect limitations in Matshoba's development of this concern.

1981: 63.

Vaughan feels that Matshoba fails adequately to represent 'the nature and sources of the exploited/oppressed condition of the vast mass of African people': accordingly, he does not tackle the fundamental problems of the African working masses. A concentration on racial issues rather than class issues, the argument goes, fails to raise popular consciousness in a way that would develop the 'type of strategies of resistance to exploitation and oppression' that Vaughan himself considers appropriate. 'Is Matshoba', he asks, 'giving expression to his own petty-bourgeois *activity* vis-a-vis working-class *passivity*?' (1981: 45).

Richard Rive's response differs from those of both of the preceding critics:

The only prose [in the 70s and 80s] which moved in

the direction [that is, away from the Protest School and toward Black Consciousness] was Mtutuzeli Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* (1979) and some of the stories edited by Mothobi Mutloatse in *Forced Landing*.

1982: 15.

Similarly, a more positive reaction is evident in a sample of comments by reviewers in *Voice*, *The Natal Witness*, *The Sowetan*, *The Sunday Mirror*, and *New Nation*:

- a true reflection of a black man's life.
- does not preach revolution. Or Communism.
- Neither does it sing the praises of the banned ANC or PAC.

*The Sunday Mirror* 85/05/01.

- the writer shares in more than the struggle and hardship of his people. He also shares in their hope and vision.

*New Nation* 86/07/06.

- important in literary terms, but also because they speak for a people with great courage, and without defeat.

*Voice*, 3 (37) 1979.

- lack of bitterness...

Obed Musi, *Voice*, 3 (40) 1979.

- one of the writers a contemporary black person must know.

Khaba Mkhize, *The Natal Witness* 86/08/08.

- gripping...well-written...philosophical utterings on real political issues...

Khaba Mkhize, *The New Nation* 86/08/23.

These comments tend to endorse the sympathetic response from those white critics who have made a point in trying to re-think stock Western academic preferences for the 'rich complex character' and the 'unified impression'.

Like Paton, Ursula Barnett and David Maughan Brown find features more positive than negative in Matshoba's writing and the views of these critics can be seen as characteristic of what we may call the 'Africanist' perspective:

- a land mark in the development of South African short-story writing.

- [Matshoba's stories] have the effect of enabling [black] readers not only to recognize the conditions of their own existence imaged in the fiction, but also to recognize the accuracy of the storyteller's analysis of the underlying reasons for those conditions being as harsh as they are... Matshoba evokes for white readers who have not been exposed to it the barrenness and dehumanizing brutality of much of what passes for life in the black 'townships' with gut-wrenching directness.  
Maughan Brown, 1985: 218.

- One of the most original talents in the short fiction field. In powerful long stories... there is never any cant or use of slogans. Mere ideology, whether it be apartheid, socialism, communism, democracy, he calls hokum.

- ...fine sense of the dramatic.

- ...humour of a sardonic kind with a touch of original flippancy.  
Barnett, 1983: 216.

It would seem, then, that Matshoba's champions and detractors cannot simply be categorised respectively as 'black' and 'white'. Rather, the stories challenged traditional Western expectations concerning the modern (written) short story, finding their power not so much in complications of plot and character but in direct statement, not so much in showing as in telling, not primarily in 'universal' concerns but in immediate political experience, and not, as one has been led to expect, in the formal resolution of themes, but in a kind of exploration by recurrence of strong experiential narratives. As we shall see, however, Matshoba does not fit neatly into one 'pattern' of expectation at the expense of another.

Something of the concerns of the collection can be seen from brief synopses of the stories. The first story, 'My Friend, the Outcast', focuses on bureaucratic tyrannies. A family is evicted from its new home in Mzimhlope (a suburb of Soweto) for non-payment of rent. But this offence, it turns out, has been fabricated by the black officials of the administration board in order to provide themselves with an excuse for offering the house to others who are prepared to pay a bribe. Proof of payment and offers to pay the alleged 'backlog' by the original inhabitants fail to move the officials who have already allocated the house to a man who can clearly afford to



pay a substantial bribe. When this person arrives at the home to find the family and its belongings in the street, however, he shows compassion and refuses to take the house. The title story, 'Call Me Not a Man', consolidates the theme of bureaucratic repression. In this case, African police reservists fabricate offences in order to extract 'fines' from workers as they alight from the trains with their paypackets. This story highlights the frustration of a man who has begun to believe in the inevitability of his victimization and cannot, in consequence, assert himself against these daily injustices. The theme of injustice at the hands of black hirelings is framed by racial tensions in 'A Glimpse of Slavery'. This story describes what has become an archetypal situation in black storytelling: the 'employment' of convict labour by white farmers, who then maltreat their 'slaves'. The narrator is 'hired' by Koos de Wet, a savage farm-owner whose black overseer proves to be equally cruel to the helpless convicts. 'A Son of the First Generation' tells the story of a young black man whose fiancée (also black) gives birth to a 'coloured' child. Here Matshoba highlights the paradoxes inherent in a racially polarized South African society. The childhood of the white father is recounted in order to show how this man's deep love for the woman who was his 'nanny' has led him to seek love from black women: a love which cannot be satisfied in a permanent relationship because of the Race Laws. The result of this frustration is a series of fleeting sexual encounters with black women whenever the opportunity arises. He seduces Martha when she is drunk at a party, and she eventually gives birth to his half-caste child. 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' concerns a journey by the protagonist from Soweto to Robben Island to visit his brother, who is in prison on political charges. As the title suggests, the story explores the significance of Robben Island in the mythology and reality of African resistance. The traveller has to question his own tendency to categorise whites as 'evil' when he meets some who are involved in the 'struggle' and learns that there are even some white political prisoners on Robben Island. The motif of a journey of 'enlightenment' is repeated in the story 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion'. The protagonist travels to the Transkei by train and bus and, as in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', he undergoes a mental 'discovery'. In this instance, he learns amid disillusion, as he finds that his friends in the 'homelands' have been seduced into an utterly materialistic style of life. Using amaXhosa history as allegory, he considers the consequences of the 'homelands' policy on the moral rectitude of his now wayward friends. The final story, 'Behind the Veil of Complacency', describes an incident concerning two young lovers whose happy evening stroll

is spoiled by a confrontation with a white shopkeeper, nicknamed by the narrator as Mashonisa (the Jew). The shopkeeper accuses the young man of stealing an orange and calls him 'Kaffer'. The young man's appeal for police help is to no avail, and he too experiences the helplessness described in 'Call Me not a Man': the sense of being dehumanized ('No man can stand being humiliated before the most important people in his life forever' (p. 197)). Another story by Matshoba, 'To Kill a Man's Pride', is included in the collection *Africa South Contemporary Writings*, edited by Mothobi Mutloatse. Depicting the horrors of hostel life, this story is particularly topical in 1991 when negotiations towards a peaceful non-racial future have been jeopardized by increasing fighting between migrant hostel dwellers, mainly from Zululand, and bands of ANC-aligned 'comrades' from the townships in which the hostels are situated.

Even a cursory reading of Matshoba's stories will alert one to the fact that they raise questions concerning the unity of content and form. Valerie Shaw may be correct when she points out that it is almost impossible to stabilize a definition of the genre short story, which, like any other literary form, varies according to the period in which it was written. Nevertheless, it is possible for the sake of definition to think of a distinct genre of 'multifarious nature in which the constant feature seems to be the achievement of narrative purpose in a comparatively brief space' (1983: 21). Shaw illustrates the 'inclinations' which 'stamp the work' of a good short-story writer. Using examples from the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway and others, she shows that 'unity of effect' and 'organic wholeness' are essential to the aim of the short story: that is, the need to achieve a single concentrated impression. The short story, therefore, 'cannot linger to unfold for the reader the little incidental and wayward episodes, the dull patches and uneventful intervals through which he actually experiences time' (1983: 46). As we shall see, however, Matshoba's stories, despite their contemporary interests, could be more closely identified with Walter Benjamin's view of pre-technological, oral art:

The short story...has removed itself from the oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.

1973: 92.



In addressing the themes of bureaucracy, the injustice inflicted by black 'sellouts' on fellow blacks, white oppression of blacks, and miscegenation, Matshoba does not satisfy Poe's dictum of 'unity of impression', and the defining characteristic of his stories is certainly not that of a tight, climactic and linear structure. In fact, many of the stories have no discernible climax, denouement, or dramatic resolution. Most are not really short (one being fifty-one pages in length) and nearly all start *in media res*, a technique which Walter Ong identifies as 'not a consciously continued ploy but the original, natural, inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative' (1982: 44). The stories also contain flashbacks, admonitions to the reader, and a series of episodes, all these being devices which are typical of 'oral literature', the concept of which will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter. The stories are also interspersed with long arguments and digressions, and raise the question as to whether these stories can actually be considered 'short stories'. Not only is there an element of 'retelling' in individual stories, but in the collection as a whole a recurrence of themes is apparent, and it might be worth considering first this cumulative characteristic which has affinities with what Forest Ingram defines as a 'short story cycle':

A book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experiences on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of its component parts.

1971: 202.

The main feature of the cycle is a dynamic pattern of recurrent development, which appears as a recognizable design: a design differing from the novel and absent from a mere collection of short stories (Ingram 1971: 203). Ingram is convinced that a misunderstanding of the intrinsic aesthetic design of cycles, such as we find in the stories of Franz Kafka, John Steinbeck, Albert Camus, Isaac Babel, Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson, has led to mistaken assessments on the part of critics and, therefore, to these works being 'undervalued' (1971: 203). Matshoba has remarked in conversation that he was impressed with and probably influenced by the great Russian writers, especially Isaac Babel. Although his stories bear no thematic or stylistic resemblance to those of Babel, the mythologizing of Soweto, the recurrent references to the traveller or pilgrim, to the journey, to communal sharing, to the role of women in society,

to 'black' suffering under oppression, and, in spite of the presence of fictionalised characters, a pervading sense of autobiographical comment, have the cumulative effect of providing a common 'voice' which unifies the collection at the same time as it addresses different issues in the different stories. As my synopses will have suggested, certain key issues emerge and re-emerge in the telling of each story: for example, the oppression of blacks by other blacks who have 'sold out' to the system, and the consequences of racial polarization.

In an analysis of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg: Ohio* Ingram shows how, in the cyclic patterns, an entire community emerges with mythic stature in the mind of the single narrator. We also see how George Willard, through his reappearances in the stories in various contexts, comes to embody the frustrated desires of the inhabitants of Wineburg inhabitants to break out of their perpetual adolescence and grotesquerie (1971: 21). In a similar way, Matshoba's Soweto and its people are embodied in the typical narrator whose different roles, in different stories, do not disguise the fact that he is meant to represent the author's own voice of counsel or advice. In each story the narrator's voice assumes representative 'people's' interests as it mediates between their past history and their present social experience. It is interesting to note that when the collection was first published, black reviewers ignored the presence of any possible conventions of fiction in the stories and, in their reviews, repeatedly referred the experiences to Matshoba himself:

By rights I should be reviewing *Call Me Not a Man* but I feel the best way to whet your appetite in understanding the black experience as tested by Mtutuzeli and his comrades, is by way of quoting verbatim some of his lines and thoughts from the 200-page book. Here we go: The quotes are from the story 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', written about a visit to Robben Island to see his younger brother, Diliza, who later died in what some suspect to be a faked car accident in Soweto.  
Khaba Mkhize, *The Natal Witness* 86/08/28.

In this particular story the narrator is not actually identified as the author, nor is his brother named. But the reviewer takes it for granted that the characters represent Matshoba and his brother. This impression was no doubt encouraged by Matshoba's autobiographical introduction to the collection; even there, however, there was no mention of his brother Diliza by name.

The pattern of recurrence and development in the short-story cycle influences the

significance we attach to characters and themes. As elements in one story are revised, perhaps in the altered context of another story, realistic detail begins to resonate with authority and symbolic import. As in the case of Joyce's Dublin or Camus's Algeria, Matshoba's Soweto (he refers constantly to 'my Soweto', even in the stories set outside Soweto) begins to strike us as a community of interests, hardships and concerns. The underlying idea is one of African humanism with its inclinations to sharing the pain and joy of everyday life. In those stories set away from Soweto, it is always Soweto that remains the dominant influence in the narrator's experience, and other places are compared with Soweto usually to their disadvantage:

I felt as if I were leaving my dear location, dear  
old Mzimhlope, forever...  
I also found an explanation as to why the  
human drift is more towards the cities than in the  
opposite direction; why men prefer being  
brutalized by urban hostel existence to spending  
their lives in the countryside. The latter might  
be a healthier environment according to scientific  
argument, but my heart will never be parted from  
my polluted, rat-race city background.

1979: 151.

In fact, the characters and their attitudes are shaped by life in Soweto. The opening story 'My Friend, the Outcast', for example, illustrates the narrator's concern for his friend's family in a spirit of communal caring amid hardship:

The neighbours offered to divide the furniture and  
other things and to keep them until everything was  
back to normal. Some wanted to give them a place  
to sleep in their own crowded homes, but Mrs  
Nyembezi declined politely, saying that they had  
already done enough for them by donating the  
fifteen rand and taking their belongings for  
safekeeping.

1979: 16.

The accusation of 'dreary plotlessness' (quoted earlier) would seem to be confirmed by the failure of the dramatic potential in the story, 'Behind the Veil of Complacency'. The authorial promise of 'the real outrageousness of what I am going to tell you about' (p. 188) is not realized as the story unfolds. Is this due to 'plotlessness', however, or is it because the real outrageousness can only be grasped after the reader has begun to experience in some composite way 'black life on

my side of the fence' (p. x)?

Such a community of feeling is assisted by recurrent, situational references made possible by the device of the short-story cycle and, as we see in 'Behind the Veil of Complacency', actions of solidarity are even effected in conditions of alienation and violence. At the outset of this story the reader is warned that a 'veil of complacency' may occlude an understanding of the implications of what s/he is about to hear. The insensitive reader is likened to someone who would 'tear a Rembrandt or a da Vinci original from its gallery wall...or put a Mzwaki graphic into the fire' and fail to comprehend how 'we who care about art feel towards you' (p. 188). If 'you' are this type of reader, warns the narrator, 'you'd better stop reading here...you're apathetic, a robot that continues to function as long as its computer is in good order' (p. 189). The story opens with two young people strolling hand in hand through the streets of Soweto, 'sunshine in their souls... oblivious of the many people, of the buzzing traffic, or even of their route to their destination' (pp. 188-189).

Setting and time are specific: Johannesburg, 'a sunny Friday afternoon, the eighteenth of May seventynine' (p. 188), but the characters are anonymous 'workers' or 'slaves' who have been paid by the 'capitalists' and so 'can take their girls out for drinks without fear of running short of money while the spots were hot' (p. 189). Only an italicised 'Their' introduces the protagonist and his girlfriend and, thereafter, he is referred to as 'the young man', 'her friend', or 'Mapula's friend', but is never named. He is a 'young man the driving force of whose life was the conviction that he hated oppression and its resultant exploitation of man by man' (p. 191), and she is 'beautiful', with 'petal-delicate arms' (p. 192). The characterization appears to be stereotyped, and the language stilted as it is made to reflect the results of an inappropriate education:

I wish I were already through with this school  
so that I might apply my mind to concrete things...  
for instance get a chance to study black South  
African literature, rather than spend hours trying  
to imbibe Silas Marner.

1979: 191.

In such a way the narrator repeatedly interrupts the dramatic action with platitudes and clichéd expressions:

This is a virtue that some of us true South Africans aspire to every day of our lives - that where the 'races' encounter, it should be in harmony until they depart in repulsive accordance with what is decreed by the powers that be.

1979: 190.

and these authorial interjections seem to lend support to accusations that Matshoba 'tells' rather than 'shows'. But a closer look at the story reveals a functional use of the 'cliché' and 'word of advice'.

The couple stops for a lunch of 'porridge and chips', and before leaving the eating place they buy some oranges. Later they enter a shop to buy cigarettes. The narrator comments that the shopowner 'did not strike the united black souls in his shop as being anywhere near pleasant', thereby implying a 'black unity' even in what is usually a very mixed group in the ordinary milieu of a shop. Mapula takes one of the oranges, which had been purchased earlier, and begins to peel it, whereupon the shopkeeper demands 'five cents for the orange'. An argument between 'Mapula's friend' and 'the old abominable soul' ensues, leading to the hurried exit of the young man pursued by the enraged 'Mashonisa'. The white shopkeeper is caricatured to a point where he loses credibility. He is nicknamed Mashonisa (Jew), compared to Shylock, and referred to as the 'capitalist' whose wife is 'apparently his servant both in the shop and at home'. He chases the protagonist 'like an enraged, wounded rhino' carrying a 'two-foot-long club,' 'vomiting all the blasphemy' of his 'bitter soul' 'with the scream of a bird of hell': "You kaffer! Go to Soweto, you kaffer...kaffer....!" (p. 196). So far the story would seem to corroborate Ndebele's concern that

the average South African...writing's probing into the South African experience has been largely superficial. This superficiality comes from the tendency to produce fiction that is built around the interaction of surface symbols of the South African reality. These symbols can easily be characterized as ones of either good or evil or, even more accurately, symbols of evil on the one hand, and symbols of the victims of evil on the other hand. Thus, as far as the former kinds of symbols are concerned, we will find an array of 'sell-outs', 'baases', 'madams', policemen, cruel farmers and their overseers, bantustans, farm

labourers, township superintendents and their subordinate functionaries. On the other hand, the victims will be tsotsis, convicts, beggars, washerwomen, road-gang diggers, nightwatchmen, priests, shebeen kings and queens, and various kinds of 'law-abiding' citizens. All these symbols appear in most of our writings as finished products, often without a personal history. As such they appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate. Their human anonymity becomes the dialectical equivalent of the anonymity to which the oppressive system consigns millions of oppressed Africans. Thus, instead of clarifying the tragic human experience of oppression, such fiction becomes grounded in the very negation it seeks to transcend.

1984a: 44.

Ndebele makes a valid point. But is he not too bound by the Western expectations of character, psychology and unity of dramatic action which I mentioned earlier? 'Behind the Veil of Complacency' accepts that South African racial interactions are conducted in terms of stereotypes and clichés. If the white shopkeeper is denounced as one who predictably calls the black man 'kaffer', the black man, too, is guilty of relying on stereotyping by nicknaming the shopkeeper 'Mashonisa' (Jew), 'Shylock' and 'capitalist'. What Matshoba does, however, is to create an exemplary situation in order to illustrate the moral of his tale, rather than evoke a mental terrain of individual interiority. The young man's thoughts are of

no money for black education. Mh.....parliament:  
the destiny of the fatherland tossed to and fro  
across the floor like a ping-pong ball, while true  
patriots hold their breaths in prison; vile  
insinuations concerning the black man's future. Mh!

1979: 189.

These are matters of concern to a particular community rather than to a specific individual and represent an approach which differs from the modern Western liberal preoccupation with interiority, and hence with subtle and elaborate characterization. Minutely delineated characters are meant to establish 'unique' personalities of individual life. Matshoba's concern is with people in a situation, and he tends to allow the situational frame of reference to give purpose to his story. His approach displays, in fact, a strong oral-story influence, where, as in the case of Matshoba's stories, the emphasis is on the cautionary tale in which the characters are



representative of social attitudes or qualities. In 'Behind the Veil of Complacency', folklorism is inextricably mixed with contemporary immediacies, and the story is meant to illustrate the point that those who are blinded by established convention or prejudice (veiled in complacency) cannot be sensitive to the significance of any situation.

We need to keep in mind that the conditions of Matshoba's life are characterised by what has been termed an 'oral residue'. In Soweto urbanization is a ragged process; people for whom the extended family and rural memories are a living reality live close together. Face to face contact helps convey messages in contexts where illiteracy or semi-literacy is still wide-spread. In a review of a critical work by Lemuel A. Johnson et al, *Towards Defining an African Aesthetic*, John Lynch suggests that 'orality may be the key to understanding and appreciating literature by black artists', thus echoing the Nigerian critic Phanuel Egejuru's contention that the African oral tradition 'is the greatest inspiration of African literature' (1986: 71). In interviews with Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ngugu wa Thiong'o and Esk'ia Mphahlele, Egejuru remarks that, although they write in English, they all speak of their narrative technique as having been influenced by their mother tongue and by the oral tradition in their respective cultures. She notes that Leopold Senghor, who writes in French, has read a great deal from the French troubadours and later poets, but that his greatest sources of inspiration are the 'gymnic poetesses' of his native soil (1986: 72).

Modern readers are no longer able to conceive of oral art without reference, conscious or unconscious, to writing. We find it difficult to represent to our minds 'a heritage of verbally organised materials except as some variant of writing even when they have nothing to do with writing at all' (Ong, 1989: 11). It is necessary, Ong maintains, to reconstruct as far as we can the oral antecedents of literacy to promote a better understanding of what literacy has meant in shaping man's consciousness in 'technology' cultures. Such an undertaking should allow insight into the type of literature which remains strongly influenced by a 'residual orality'. Ong describes how Milman Parry, in his doctoral thesis (1928), demonstrated that virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy forced on it by oral methods of composition. These can be reconstructed by careful study, once one puts aside the assumptions about expression and thought processes engraved in the psyche by generations of literate culture. This type of close study reveals that 'oral narrative is made up of standardized formulas and themes, set phrases and cliches, and was valued for these very features which later readers

have been trained in principle to disvalue' (Ong, 1989: 21). Cliches were valued because not only the poets, but the entire oral thought-world, relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought. In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated, or it would be lost (1989: 24).

Although modern black writers are part of a literate world, the communities they live in are - as I said above - mainly 'non-literate', and the speech and thought patterns of such a community will, to a degree, imitate oral modes. Jeff Opland has observed, for instance, that when Xhosa poets learn to write, their written poetry is also characterized by a formulaic style (1984). In South Africa, black urban writers of today have usually been educated under a combination of colonial and Bantu education while they work in modern technological workplaces. If such hybrid factors have influenced their style, so has the fact of their continuing close contact with the orality of 'township' life. At school the emphasis on traditional Western literature - usually learnt by rote - and on the Bible provides a strange variant on oral formulae: metaphors and cliches are likely to be employed to serve English expression. In Matshoba we often find a curious mix of contemporary discourse, based on the vernacular, and archaic rhetoric drawn from a literary background - the latter frequently selected because of a residual taste for oral modes of expression. At one or two points, one cannot help hearing proverbs and idioms as if learnt from Best's *Students' Companion*. (Matshoba, who completed school in Soweto, started a science degree at Fort Hare, but decided that 'science was too abstract', and dropped out of university. Three years later he returned to Fort Hare and registered for a B. Comm. (Law). When the events of 1976 'exploded', he began to feel a compulsion to write about his life - black life - and abandoned a formal education for good.)

This mixture of 'oral' and 'literary' responses is especially evident in the story 'A Son of the First Generation', in which an exemplary situation allows the narrator to philosophize on the dramatic events and to moralize to his readers in an epilogue dedicated to his ' "coloured" brothers and sisters' (p.91). In spite of its intention to demonstrate a point by way of example, the story is powerfully presented and deals with a number of complex issues, voicing concerns that were unusual in black writing at the time. In this case the characters are individualized and strongly drawn, even as they are allowed to point to the types found in the exemplum, and the narrative is structured to gain maximum impact from the unfolding of events. The narrator recounts a tale he has overheard on a commuter train, using a narrative strategy that is



common in oral tales. In an oral culture, learning or knowing means achieving close empathetic, communal identification with the known (Ong, 1989: 46). Hence, the narrator impresses the authenticity of his tale on a listener by claiming to have experienced events himself or by quoting credible witnesses. In this case, he recounts the 'field of stories' in which he participates:

Don't anyone say I was listening in on anybody. In the first place I never go around with earplugs. And then, you see, they were talking through my head, my ears and consciousness forming a sort of crossed-line telephone system.

1979: 66.

As he identifies with the characters, he adopts the omniscient view:

He had progressed by no more than a few faltering strides while seeking an explanation. Then his inner self challenged his will to a turbulent tug-of-war for his body and he found himself standing in the middle of a dirty track like one trying to locate a vital factor in the shadows of his memory.

1979: 68.

Dramatic description is easily suspended, however, and the narrator reverts on occasions to the first person to give opinions or injunctions to the reader regarding events:

- But I do not see what can be immoral...
- To me a so-called 'Coloured' human being is a brother....

1979: 91.

The key to the story has been revealed at the outset, when a young black man confides to an older friend, described by the narrator as 'commuter train philosopher' (an epithet which more aptly fits the narrator himself), that he is miserable because he has just become a 'stepfather'. The older man is incredulous: 'You want to tell me that the child is not yours... How can that be? *Mos ub'umuskepa* almost everyday *uMartha*...' (p. 66). A crisis is thus introduced to the everyday conversation on the train to work, and will provide the dramatic impetus for what is to follow. Mondi, the young man, confesses that his fiancé, Martha, has given birth to a 'coloured child'. We are led back in time as the narrator re-constructs the young man's account of the course of events leading up to his misfortune. Chronological shifts or changes in focus are

signalled by headings such as 'The Tune-in', 'The Previous Day', and 'Face to Face with the Truth'. These guide the reader through the complex pattern of events which forms the background to the birth of the baby and also supports the moral message which is eventually delivered in a discrete epilogue. The excitement and jubilation which we share with Mondé on learning that he has become the father of 'a bonny boy' is undercut by our prior knowledge of his eventual heartbreak, with the result that we want to link the climactic event to the explanation of its cause.

As the story unfolds, various issues are introduced, sometimes by the narrator, at others through debates between characters. An example is the conversation between Mondé and Martha, in which they discuss monogamous relationships:

'S'true, Mondé! I never loved anybody before you. That's why drink used to be a prerequisite in all my associations with men. I had to have something with which to lessen the pain of my shame at being intimate with men I did not love. Had to be "anaesthetised" before I could be operated upon.'

'You talk as if you're the only perein with a history. Always mentioning the past as if you lost something by dragging yourself out of a vicious way of life. What is it that you miss so much in the past, which makes you look back, hey sweetheart?' Mondé asked, slightly disturbed at being reminded of the bygone days and the embarrassing lengths to which he had gone to convince Martha that one man was enough to make a woman happy and that he was the man. His friends had made him an object of mockery for chasing one girl when the hunting grounds abounded with easy game.

1979: 71.

No narratorial stance is proffered on this issue and the reader is left to reflect on the issues raised in the passage and their significance in the story, especially in terms of the later 'betrayal' of Mondé by Martha. This combination of 'telling' and 'showing' is characteristic of Matshoba's hybrid narrative style and indicates that he does not limit his characters in such a way that they 'appear as mere ideas to be marshalled this way or that in a moral debate' (Ndebele, 1984: 44).

The most important moral debate in 'A Son of the First Generation' concerns the immorality of the Immorality Act and, in the story of Dawid Steenkamp, Matshoba develops

this theme in what is, arguably, the most powerful and sensitive piece of writing in the cycle. The account of Dawid Steenkamp's childhood love for his black 'nannie' May, which, by psycho-sexual transference, eventuates in his making love to Martha, highlights an anomaly in South African life: the strong attraction that many 'white' South African men, in spite of their social conditioning, feel for 'black' women. Dawid, the father of Martha's 'white' baby, had been reared by May and she

had been so dear to him and he to her that he had evolved an attachment akin to an Oedipus complex towards May and not towards his natural mother.  
1979: 76.

Dawid sleeps in May's room until he is eleven years old, and even when he moves to his own room 'the bond between them never loosened' (p. 77).

Although the 'prejudices peculiar to this land' remind May of her 'position in life' (as in the instance when the family is going to church and Dawid remains at home with her as she cannot attend a white church, or when she explains why she cannot swim with Dawid at the park), these prejudices do not rub off on Dawid, whose 'childish innocence of human evils had made him pure' (p. 77). Only when Dawid goes away to boarding school and is exposed to the prejudices of his peers does 'a remarkable change' occur. May observes that Dawid's speech becomes 'uncouth': 'Your boyfriend is looking for you May', he had said when her husband came to take her out on her day-off. 'When [boys] reach a certain stage of their lives they become incontinent of speech', reflects May. Dawid also suddenly demands to be addressed only in 'tongue-knotting Afrikaans' (p. 78). Here, as in later stories, Matshoba shows an awareness of the subtle changes in discourse effected by changes in social influences. Once May's usefulness to the Steenkamps is 'at its end' she returns to Kwazulu but

she could not quite accept the fact that all the love she had showered on the boy when he was younger, and which had been rewarded with a pure child's love, could be so completely erased by later teachings of hatred and contempt. For this reason she clung desperately to the hope that maturity and more experience would later give her 'white son, Dawie' a more rational outlook on life, and the memory of a black woman who had tried to

sow an all-embracing love in his soul would linger  
in his mind.

1979: 79.

May's 'hope' is realized, but the taboos of Dawid's culture pervert the love she has sown in him and send him on a 'tireless search for fulfilment' (p. 86), which can never be satisfied because in apartheid South Africa the love he seeks must always be bought and thereby degraded:

His main hunting ground was Swaziland, beyond  
the borders of the country he so loved, yet so  
hated for its laws. At home, it was the dark  
alleys of Hillbrow and the glittering streets  
of downtown Golden City.

1979: 86.

Lewis Nkosi identifies 'the dream of sexual fulfilment in the arms of the woman of another race' as a 'dark and half-forbidden theme of South African literature'. In an acute analysis of the racial laws of South Africa, he expresses what Matshoba seems to be implying in the story of Dawid Steenkamp:

The anxiety represented by the historical fact of race mixture in their background heightens rather than minimizes the sense of sexual guilt; it must accentuate the fear of and wish for contact, and it should excite an even stronger impulse to appease this secret wish by toughening one's attitude to race. Understandable that Afrikaners and the Nationalist Government put more laws in the Statute Book ... to prevent sexual intercourse...between black and white, than any other government before it. Also understandable, though somewhat ironical, is the fact that more Afrikaners than English South Africans have been found transgressing this law prohibiting interracial sex. Black Africans often wonder why if white South Africans find the idea of mixing with blacks so appalling they have nevertheless found it necessary to prevent this by enacting legislation, as though were legal sanctions to disappear the desire for sexual contact would be too strong for anyone to bear.

1983: 38.

The story of Martha and Monde and Dawid and May, despite its stock situation, displays a complexity and an awareness of diverse social and psychological issues that refutes such

charges as: 'superficiality' (Ndebele); 'stating instead of implying' (Abrahams); 'a mere documentary of oppression' (Ndebele); 'the absence of a *lived* quality of experience' (Vaughan). Although the situation is 'typical' in South African patterns of socio-political experience, the characters are finely delineated. They can all be seen, in Ndebele's terms, as 'symbols of the victims of apartheid', yet each is given an unusual perception of the anomalies of situation and tradition, thereby affording the reader psychological insight into the different characters. Dawid is shown to be a loner, which he attributes to his having been 'torn away from the one person he had ever loved, and taught to hate' (p. 86). He is 'so impartially considerate to everyone...that Mme. Thandi had once said of him: "This one is lost. He has forgotten that he is white or else he never knew it"' (p. 86). Martha's alcoholism is introduced in an early discussion with Monde (quoted above): this lends credibility to her 'lapse' at the party. This 'lapse', however, is shown as the result of a number of complex factors and is not just a drunken reaction: Each time Dawid looked into her eyes

she had looked away...afraid that if she allowed their eyes to meet and lock something might happen which would necessitate a cold brush-off for poor Dawie. Poor Dawie! Yes, that was it. His eyes, so full of longing, looked at her...Her love for Monde,...instructed her to have nothing to do with this...strange and compelling appeal to the roots of her human sympathy...She experienced a short struggle between the equal forces of disgust and compassion...The disgust...reminded her of the person she had been before she met Monde. The compassion told her of the person she was now. And in that moment she had known that she, as the person she now was, felt responsible for this white stranger. Even though her compassion threatened the very basis of her new self, her love for Monde! Poor Dawie!

1979: 87.

Monde's early questioning of his own reactions of pride and jealousy when another man makes advances to Martha, and the compassionate understanding he shows for Martha's past, make his eventual acceptance of the baby entirely credible, in spite of his pain. All these intricate details of emotion and behaviour imbue the 'message' of the story with an emotional, living context, quite the opposite of the 'human anonymity' of 'surface symbols' described by Ndebele.

At the close of the story, Martha sums up the moral of the tale:

'And it shows that despite the laws which divide people according to race, men are equal and related to each other in their natural context. Every animal species reproduces within itself, with those of its own kind. He, the first generation 'coloured' child, my child, links us in direct relationship with the people of the white skin.'

1979: 90.

The epilogue, which is truly an epilogue in that it is removed from the dramatic narrative, returns us to the voice of the storyteller, who reinforces the moral in the way an oral storyteller would repeat an important message to ensure that members of the audience, if they had missed it in the telling, would leave with the point firmly in their minds:

Yes, a child is born; a new human being comes into the world, and the worldly gods have the audacity to call his natural conception an immoral act, insinuating by that that the child's very existence is immoral! But I do not see what can be immoral in the mere existence of a human being. Even a child born after an act of rape cannot be stripped of its right to exist, once born.

1979: 91.

The complexity of this story in structure and content, with 'showing' and 'telling' operating in reinforcing ways, should alert critics to the dangers of approaching works of this nature through a 'veil of complacency' which condones only one set of rules for 'effective fiction'.

In his enumeration of the rules for 'effective fiction' that he feels are 'disregarded' by Matshoba, Lionel Abrahams includes 'the subjugation of material to form'. Literary form will naturally also be influenced by residual orality. 'Why', asks Ong, 'was all lengthy narrative before the early 1800s more or less episodic as far as we know, all over the world?' and 'Why had no one written a tidy detective story before 1841?' (1989: 16). In explanation Ong cites Berkley Peabody (1975: 172-9) who points to a certain incompatibility between linear plot and oral memory. Peabody makes it clear that the true 'thought', or content, of Greek oral epos dwells in the remembered traditional formulaic and stanzaic patterns rather than in the conscious intentions of the singer to organize or 'plot' narrative in a certain remembered way. This type of 'residual orality', when transferred to the situation of black township life (as I have

stated above), could perhaps help to explain the preference for the short story, and for poetry, shown by black writers up until recent years. It is notable, for instance, that the longer of Matshoba's stories seem to be built from a series of episodes. The longest story in the collection, 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', relates the tale, in the first person, of a man's journey from his home in Soweto to Robben Island to visit his brother, who has been imprisoned for political 'crimes'. The fifty-page story is divided into four sections: 'The Letter', 'A Journey through South African Life', 'The Enlightenment' and 'The Island'.

'The Letter' begins with a flashback to the day a letter arrived from the Prison's Department giving the narrator 'permission to embark on a pilgrimage to the "holiest of holies"'. The significance of this journey is thus established at the outset. Thandi, the narrator, then moves back in time to recall two visits from prison officials to make sure he 'was the man who had applied' (p. 92) and then even further into the past as 'another memory floated across the screen of my mind - the day they took him away' (p. 93). This technique of 'flashing' back and forth chronologically at the introduction of a story is identified by Ong as the 'original, natural way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative' (1989: 144). As the oral poet does not have recourse to the revisions made possible by the 'rational' analytic arrangements of written composition, some focal point will prompt him to start the story 'in media res' and he may then proceed to fill in the details which lead up to the climax, not necessarily in chronological order but as they recur in his memory. The result is an accumulation of episodes which illuminate each other, ~~although they are not presented in linear order~~. As in Matshoba's story, oral tales will often begin with the arrival of a 'message', in this case a letter. But a letter is also solidly part of a modern, technological, literate world, and we are reminded that any identifiable oral residue is not merely an anthropological heritage which enables certain societies to go on repeating the tales and legends of their ancestors; rather, it is part of the living cultural life of a community and cannot remain 'pure'. Ndebele explains:

The oral tradition is...growing all the time, and you don't have to go to the rural areas, to the grandmothers, it exists in the slums, in the slums, in the cities of Africa. It takes various forms and more often than not it uses the modern imagery of the city. In Lesotho for example there is a form of oral poetry that was developed by miners, who are migrant workers. They have developed a very personal startling new imagery,



often concerned with the mines and their experiences at work, so the oral tradition is also extremely flexible and highly inventive.

1988: 78

The second section of the story describes the 'Journey', a journey which, as the title implies, can be likened to the typical hero's quest in ancient tales. It starts on the 'fourteenth of December' as a specific journey undertaken by a specific individual, while it is also "A Journey through South African Life". Because 'this was a pilgrimage and not just a jolly trip' (p. 95) a friend offers to 'burn a few litres of invaluable petrol in his blue van' to take the pilgrim to the station, where the narrator boards the train for Cape Town and takes the reader on a 'journey through South African life'. The journey embraces a series of episodes in which various situations allow the narrator to digress into passages of direct political comment, descriptions of historical events, and philosophical observations on life in general. Each apparent digression unfolds into another aspect of the story, or clarifies either an earlier event or one that is to follow, by what Benjamin called, 'the slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers' (1973: 92) to form the complete narrative. As he passes Orlando West High School the narrator, Thandi, is reminded of how 'the first bullet of seventy-six snuffed out thirteen-year-old Hector Peterson's life' (p. 100). As the train passes through the 'living map of Soweto', he conducts a moving 'geography' and 'history' 'class' for a 'friend' he has met on the train:

There, near that high building which is Mzimhlope station, is where I stay. This is Phomalong, beyond is Killarney. Further up is the hostel - the one that engaged in the faction of Seventy-six...The horizon is Meadowlands. The school with a green roof...is Orlando West High...Dube...Nancefield hostel : didn't know they were still enlarging those human sties...Kliptown...Lenz, for the Indians.

1979: 100.

The stranger on the train, who becomes a 'friend', is a 'big man in a grey suit who might have aroused [Thandi's] wariness were his face not familiar. Sellouts seldom go around with familiar faces' (p. 99). In this way Matshoba allows the characters to emerge as distinct personalities. Where Thandi (as well as the reader) expects a 'sellout', he finds a friend who has been a classmate at Fort Hare. This constant overlapping of individualized characters with types



supports the initial impression that this journey is both a personal account and a 'history' of South African life. Even the ticket inspector, who is presented at first as a typical railways official, 'melted like an ice-cream on a hot day into a sweet fat Afrikaner boy' (p. 101).

In a number of the other stories in the collection, characters are stereotyped as 'Boer', 'White', 'Sellout', 'Jew', and in these roles function didactically in exemplary situations. In 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' it is, however, the personality or background of the individual characters that provides material from which moral themes can be drawn. An altercation between the 'penguin' (that is, the official wearing the distinctive black and white clothes of a ticket inspector) and the man in the grey suit, anonymous at first but later given personal traits, causes the narrator to examine 'the logic of hate', initially in abstract terms, but finally as an actual illustration of official 'termination of life or incarceration on the Isle of Makana':

I tried to find the logic of hate but my mind failed me...If I hate another human being, being human myself, it means that I hate my own image. I hate myself... Now, hatred breeds distrust and consequently insecurity. I hate someone else. Therefore, I know that he hates me too. And because he hates me I do not trust him. I do not feel secure against the one I hate. What shall I do to feel secure? There are two alternatives. One: replace the hatred with love and receive love in return, then trust, then security. Two: remove those objects of my hatred who try to resist hate with hate, and railroad them to the Isle of Makana.

1979: 103.

The pondering goes on for another page and becomes quite tortuous, as if the form of speech has taken on the turmoil of the narrator's dilemma in his reflections on complexities which confront any thinking person faced with the contradictions of South African life. When 'three lovely little white fairies' peep into his compartment 'with innocent blue eyes', the narrator feels ashamed of himself for thinking "Innocent little whites growing into guilty big whites" *Nxa!* This racism is infectious' (p. 104).

During this journey Thandi's mind wrestles with many different problems of South African society: a prime concern proves to be the state of black education in the country and the tension which is caused in the person who desperately wants to learn but recognizes the ideological motives behind education controlled by whites. When the man in the grey suit

recognises Thandi as a classmate from eDikeni (Alice, the town where the University of Fort Hare is situated), Thandi recalls

That place...That hell of my mental strife. My  
refusal to conform to a training aimed at raising  
me above the grass-roots level of life to pioneer  
a 'middle-class', or help make the Bantustans  
viable. Seventy-six, and my loss of interest in  
academic pursuits that had come to seem selfish.  
The many others who wanted to go on with 'their  
studies' as if the nation was not undergoing an  
upheaval. Death did not mean anything, as long as  
they lived in dreams of 'comfortable futures'.

1979: 99.

This self-conscious tension between a desire for education (leading to a comfortable future) and the need to denounce a form of education which seems to be determined to impose middle-class values on black students is apparent in most of the stories. It creates contradictions which even now, in his middle-age in the 1990s, cause conflict in the mind of Mtutuzeli Matshoba. This is a debate which was particularly contentious in the late '70s, especially after the Soweto riots of 1976, and has once more become prominent as the appalling state of black education drives many young students to adopt the 'liberation before education' policy. The type of education they receive is perceived by them to strengthen colonization rather than lead to liberation. Such a conflation of the author's viewpoint with that of the narrator has given rise to the charge of 'lack of objectivity' (Anthony Egan). But the author deliberately employs this technique in order to impress on his readers the authenticity of his own experiences. At the same time, he suggests that his dilemmas typify 'black' experience in South Africa. Again, we can note an influence of orality: as Ong says, the oral-based story is 'empathetic and participatory, rather than objectively distanced' (1989: 45). Writing which has shed the immediacy of verbal communication, by contrast, separates the knower from the known and thus encourages conditions for 'objectivity'. In a sense the reader is disengaged or distanced by the written record (1989: 46). Even in print Matshoba seeks a close, colloquial identification with his reader and, therefore, tries to ensure engagement rather than disengagement.

As in other stories, 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' becomes the vehicle for the engagement with various social and moral issues which supersede the action in the construction of the plot. This is particularly evident in the meeting between Thandi and his brother on

Robben Island. It is an event which could be expected to provide the climactic moment, but it is reduced by its brevity and understated character to just another incident in a long series of incidents. Although the journey has been undertaken with the express purpose of visiting his brother, only a page of narrating time in a story of fifty-one pages is devoted to the meeting, while detailed attention is given to the surrounding social issues. It can be concluded from this that Matshoba's purpose is to underplay the story of an individual destiny in order to examine and to draw attention to widespread injustices and racial oppression. He thus minimises the drama of his meeting with his brother so that the brother, who is never named, is seen as part of the struggle and a victim of the regime. After Thandi's return to the mainland, Rachel asks: 'So how was your brother, Thandi?', to which he replies laconically: 'Encouraging. Being there is no more than a physical inconvenience to them.' 'Oh, that's great', says Rachel, as if they were speaking of some vague acquaintance. Thandi's use here of 'them' instead of 'him' lends support to the impression that we are intended to see the brother as representative of a group which, though the members are suffering 'physical inconvenience' for their political deeds, cannot be bowed in spirit and will never abandon the fight. This is confirmed by the narrator's closing words: "*A luta continua*" I thought'. This notion of Black Consciousness solidarity shows that the story is meant to be part of a serial - the epos of black life.

In the way he relates participatory immediacy to the experiences and ideals of a black community, Matshoba reminds us that his stories appeared initially in the journal *Staffrider*, the putative readership of which was largely black and living in Soweto. In collected form, of course, the stories began to reach another sizeable audience: the 'liberal' white academic and student market. Whereas a black 'Africanist' audience would presumably relate strongly to the debates on racial oppression (such as the account by Thandi of his reaction on seeing an ill convict being brought ashore at Cape Town), a Western-trained academic might criticize such a digression from the main story, especially as it has an obviously didactic purpose:

The man was transferred from the portable stretcher to one that was wheeled out of the ambulance. Why were they denying him the right to pass out of this damned life of suffering? For what purpose, when they had already usurped his right to live among his people, on his fatherland?...  
 ...I hated those who had done that to that man.  
 ...'There is no God' thought I.

1979: 133.

One such response to the supposed 'didactic' came from Leon de Kock, who, as I mentioned earlier, found this story 'formless and loaded with unoriginal, somewhat smug political thinking'. His type of response is often based on a misreading of the indigenous narrative forms which arguably inform black writing. Such misreading is not confined to white critics, however; even black critics seem at times to have moved so completely into a frame of thinking determined by traditional Western literary criteria that they are no longer sensitive to the effects of accumulation as a communicative mode.

Although I do not wish to dispute the validity of all of Ndebele's criticisms of some black writers for similar reasons, Ndebele himself does appear to have overlooked certain aspects of black writing which could be shown to refute his negative judgements. The average African writer, he maintains, is

working under an information ethos which for him has not habituated a tradition of rigorous analysis and interpretation, [and] produces an art of anticipated surfaces rather than one of processes: processes in character development or in social evolution, for example. He produces an art that is grounded in the negation of social debasement, where scenes of social violence and a host of examples of general social oppression become ends in themselves. As a result very little transformation in reader consciousness is to be expected since the only reader faculty engaged is the faculty of recognition. Recognition does not necessarily lead to transformation: it simply confirms. Beyond that confirmation, it may even reinforce the frustration produced by the reader's now consolidated perception of an overwhelmingly negative social reality.

1984a: 45.

Ndebele goes on to accuse Matshoba of 'accumulating fact after fact of oppression and suffering, so that we are in the end almost totally grounded in this reality without being offered, at the same time, an opportunity for aesthetic and critical estrangement' (1984a: 46).

An analysis of the story 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion', however, should show that Ndebele is less than fair to Matshoba. As in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', the narrator undertakes a journey during which both he and the reader grow in their knowledge

and understanding of many complex issues. With the journey by train and bus again providing a structural shape to the narrative, the pilgrimage, in this case, is not to a political 'shrine', but to visit a 'homeland' that has been granted its independence. The growing illumination usually associated with a journey or 'pilgrimage' takes the form of disillusionment when the narrator finds his own people colluding in a system of neo-colonialism and seduced by a materialist ethic. The fact that the author shows he is alert to the difficulties of this situation refutes the charge of 'unoriginal' or 'smug' political thinking, as well as that of 'very little transformation in reader consciousness' (Ndebele). In fact, he pursues rigorously his intention of transforming reader consciousness, as stated in the 'Autobiographical Note' that introduces *Call Me Not a Man* :

I want to reflect through my works life on my  
side of the fence, the black side: so that  
whatever happens in the future, I may not be set  
down as a 'bloodthirsty terrorist'. So that I may  
say: 'These were the events which shaped the Steve  
Bikos and the Solomon Mahlangu, and the many  
others who came before and after them.'

1979: x.

Although he unquestionably could have 'accumulated fact after fact of oppression and suffering' in order to vindicate the Bikos and Mahlangus, Matshoba does not confine himself to this approach, and, as in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion' incorporates discussion of diverse social issues, anecdotes from 'ordinary' black life, and analysis of myth and history.

Almost in defiance of another aspect of Ndebele's criticism - that is, that black writers reflect the brazenness of South African oppression only in spectacular and superficial terms - Matshoba enters solidly into the ordinary day-to-day lives of black people and raises issues which are political in the broadest sense: that is, he deals with the polis, and in fact endorses the exact context that Ndebele demands of the serious story writer, which is:

a compelling context for us to examine an infinite  
number of ethical issues which have a bearing on  
the sensitization of people towards the development  
of the entire range of culture.

1986: 154.

In Matshoba's 'return to the ordinary' (the phrase is Ndebele's) the bus/train journey plays an

appropriate role, as travelling fills so much of the daily life of the 'ordinary' black person. (The title of the journal *Staffrider* had its own aptness: 'Staffriders' are the black youths who cling to the outside of the trains and, like the staff of the SAR, get a free ride.) The train becomes the site of multifarious events. Business deals are struck, political debates take place, strikes and rallies are organized, romances begin, stories are related, and events celebrated. Artistic performances combining song, dance and mime may be enacted with audience participation and criticism. Even church services are held. A commuter will often lose his paypacket or his life-savings; babies are born and people die on trains.

During the journey to the 'land of dying illusion' - the Transkei and its farce of independence - the narrator is drawn into many debates, and various subsidiary illusions are shattered: amongst them, 'the divine right of men [as opposed to women] to make war' (p. 156); the authority of the tribal chiefs (p. 156); the belief that political independence guarantees freedom, that age brings wisdom, and that males are intellectually superior to females. Traditional commonplaces are challenged; such as, a woman's place is in the home; the father is head of the family; men are entitled to take concubines but women are morally wrong to take lovers.

These ideas about the traditional superiority of either men or women also reinforce the feminist debates which recur throughout the story cycle. In the case of 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion' these are introduced by the interpolated poem about the 'formidable chieftainness Mantatisi' (p. 148). In this way the concerns of the stories are reinforced, and the reader comes to realize that the interpolated poems and the digressions from the story are in fact integral to the total effect.

The feminist debate is woven into the story through the conversations on the bus, which provoke 'an articulate lady' to dare to 'jump into a men's discussion' (p.158). The group of men are discussing the respective roles of women and men in society. The older men show 'typical chauvinist arrogance' (p. 154), and the counterargument comes at first, surprisingly, from a young 'kwedini'. Eventually 'a young lady', who the narrator has been observing and whom he feels instinctively would like 'to contribute' if it 'were not a men's discussion', does in fact 'vociferously' enter the debate, 'sweeping her arm in a semi-circle which showed that she meant

all of us wearing trousers in that bus':

'We don't know who created it, for sure. But the  
present state of the world is definitely of your making.'  
1979: 155.

As I am suggesting, then, Ndebele's concern about ethical issues, dramatised in the range of ordinary people's responses, is a feature of this story. In fact, it is an issue which, in retrospect, appears to grant Matshoba a voice in South African literature ahead of his time, and which relates to the discussion of 'feminist' viewpoints. As in several of the other stories, 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion', takes a keen interest in the places and status in black cultural life accorded to men and women respectively.

In the story, one of the travellers, - 'the one who seemed to care little about women's views'- is shocked at the effrontery of the woman who enters a men's conversation: "*Madoda*, this woman! Whatever made you jump into a men's discussion?" The narrator controls the tension between the two sides, balancing opposing viewpoints by weighing up and commenting on the arguments. Finally, he aligns himself with the young lady: 'Her response corresponded with my own silent viewpoint' (p. 154). But he continues to reveal what might be interpreted by some as a sexist conflict in himself by introducing instances of the behaviour of some women which could lend weight to the argument of the man who accuses women of 'enslaving man':

In other words we're being blackmailed into slavery  
by the children they give us. Interesting. True to  
a certain extent, when one thinks of our sisters  
who regard matrimony as their sole ambition and  
salvation. Leave everything, education, government  
and work to the man. Fold your arms and watch with  
hawk's eyes for the one that'll flounder into the  
pit of the rapture of your companionship, thus  
limiting the scope of his thinking to work alone,  
slaving in order to feed, clothe and house an  
ever-growing family, without any chance to pursue  
the very natural virtues of justice, prudence,  
temperance and fortitude. Fock! I'm also not  
getting married until I come across a sister who  
does not conform to that base expectation.

1979: 155.

The expletive is a strange, rather shocking break in an otherwise somewhat stilted register. The litany, 'justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude', seems hardly appropriate to the

argument and creates the impression of a stock phrase used in the way as clichés are used in the vernacular. It also has considerable irony (perhaps unconsciously so) in this context, where an earlier deployment of prudence and temperance could have averted the fate of 'slaving to feed, clothe and house an ever-growing family'!

Although the narrator's claims that his viewpoint 'corresponds' with that of the 'libber's' (p. 154), he also expresses a nostalgia for 'African femininity untainted by Western standards', an attitude which could be considered to be contradictory. Once more, it is possible to recognize a tension between the attempt to accommodate emancipated views in male-female relations, and Black Consciousness ideals of solidarity with traditional African notions concerning the man's primary place in society. A similar contradiction appears in the story 'A Son of the First Generation', where Martha is described as a 'full-blooded lass' who

regarded the satisfaction she derived from her popularity with men as essential to her feminine ego, seeing no point in being a woman if one could not raise the pulses of men and attract love propositions wherever one went.

1979: 70.

That Matshoba is fully aware of the tension he reveals within himself is illustrated in 'Behind the Veil of Complacency' where the narrator, although he recognizes that he is being accused of chauvinism, is somewhat mystified by his girlfriend's accusation:

She was beautiful, but fumed when she was reminded about it. That was no priority in her life, and this was reflected in her manner of dress, denims and other types of trousers most of the time, occasionally a frock or skirt which 'make me feel uncomfortable'.

'How?'

'Like an ordinary *skebereshe* (tart).'

'Whereas you're what?'

'A person! What do you think?'

'A woman.'

'Mc! I'm not like any other woman. Many useless things that occupy most of their minds most of the time hardly ever enter mine. For instance, have you ever seen me smudged over in make-up, resembling a spectrum?'

'Naw. You don't need any of that stuff.'

'But you wouldn't be surprised if you saw me like



that, would you?’

‘Naw. You’re a woman, mos.’

‘You see? You expect it from me simply because many other vain women do it. So you conclude that all women are vain. I’m not impressed by that attitude from you. One would expect you to have sound criteria for evaluating other people, not just their sex.’

He wondered what she was driving at. He supposed that if she were sophisticated enough she would have labelled him a male chauvinist pig.

1979: 192.

From this conversation it can be seen that Matshoba is partly playing out a dialectic that is operative in his own consciousness, while bringing issues which concern him to the attention of his readers for their consideration.

Besides feminism, many other social issues are debated in the stories. Despite Mike Vaughan’s reservations regarding Matshoba’s apparent neglect of class issues in favour of those of race, the question of race and class is not ignored. In ‘Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion’ the narrator ponders the black man’s loss of identity:

Such stratagems to keep famine at bay are ingrained in the very lives of black people. Let me not limit this to blacks, but extend it to embrace the poor of the world. The third class coach surrounded me with all the sensual impressions of close-packed humanity. How apt the ‘third class’ connotation! I wonder if it is only coincidental with the social stratification into the Upper (rich), the Middle (fairly comfortable), and the Lower (simply, the deprived) classes. I wonder because we, of the third denomination, always find ourselves in crowded conditions. You need only to look at the locations - dog kennel cities - buses and trains of poor people in order to grasp my perspective. We are always lost in our crowds, our individual human value nullified. Lately the rich do not even bother to count us, to give us, at least, digital value. When they detect increases in our mass, they simply stir us into turmoil, whereby we reduce our own mass or give them excuses for massacres. Just you look at the wars all over the world, fought by the poor, set ablaze by the opulent, in many instances remunerative to the latter and costly in dear life to the former. *Sies!* These lucrative wars.

1979: 146.

(Note the expression 'dear life'. Because the idiom 'hang on for dear life' has been learned at some stage, 'dear life' is accepted as a formulaic expression and used whenever reference to 'life' is required in the narrative. There are many other instances where the adjective linked to a noun in a common expression is transferred to other occurrences of the same noun.) In this journey of 'enlightenment' and 'disillusion' the pilgrim sees in the state of Transkei the formation of a new class system with which he contrasts the informal communal ethic he knows in Soweto:

After some hours in the house I could not suppress the desire to go out among the ordinary people of my third denomination, and I asked: 'Have you people got any "spots" around here where I may chance upon some of our old colleagues from Alice?'

I sensed that they would have burst out laughing if they had not known that I was a stranger to Umtata. One did not meet people that way in the capital of the Transkei. One kept to one's rank. Classes were too well defined, as I would learn with the passage of time.

1979: 186.

The significance of this passage resides in its concern for the artificiality of a society that determines personal worth by class. Matshoba, yet again, proves himself ahead of his time by demonstrating the dangers that may lie ahead, even after the struggle for liberation has been won. One such may be the creation of class structures which lead to the oppression and marginalisation of the 'lower' classes.

Another danger that can follow the demise of colonialism is neo-colonialism. In 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion' Matshoba enters into a discussion of this phenomenon indirectly by way of an apparently rambling reconstruction of the story of the Xhosa cattle-killing that took place in the Eastern Cape in 1856 and 1857. As I have said, one of the criticisms levelled at Matshoba has been that of 'lengthy digression', but we shall see that digressions such as the tale of Nonquase are vital to an understanding of important points Matshoba wishes to impress on his reader, such as the danger of neo-colonialism. In both 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion' and 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' he digresses from the main storyline to incorporate folk-tales which he reconstructs to allow himself a new interpretation. These digressions can be shown to be integral to his aim of 'reflecting life on my side of the fence, the

black side', and also serve to illustrate that, contrary to Ndebele's reservations, Matshoba is not denying the reader analytical or critical estrangement by a superficial description of the spectacular. Rather, he draws events from history in order to apply lessons to present-day problems and experiences.

In 'Three Days in the Land of Dying Illusion' he 'constructs [his] own version of the story' (p. 165) of Nonquase, the maiden who brought about the destruction of the amaXhosa. In Matshoba's telling a contemporary political situation (the Transkei ruled by 'K.D.') is linked to this Xhosa historical myth which is offered to us by the narrator in two versions: the first reminds us of the approved school version, and this is followed by the narrator's 'revision' of the tale. The reader has been prepared for the shift to the past leap by an apology at the start of the story. By way of an apology for an apparent digression, the narrator offers a poem on Zulu and Xhosa history. We realise now that digressions have also in a sense acted as binding elements. The conversations about the role of women (to which I referred earlier), for example, strike a new note in tangential relation to the Nonquase tale: the story of a woman's central role at a moment of history in the epic drama of the amaXhosa.

Matshoba's 'revision' provides us with a fresh interpretation of this historic moment. In essence, his argument is that the killing was necessary in that it 'cleansed' the Xhosa people through hardship and reminded them of the shame of taking the crumbs offered to them by the white man. In relating his story he alters what are generally recognized by historians to be factual details in order to suit his purpose. In the story of the journey to the Transkei the narrator is puzzled by his friend's comment that 'the world looks forsaken' as they near Umtata. His mind is 'thrust back into the dubious past' and he recalls that the tragedy of Nonquase had taken place in these parts. He acknowledges that his recollection of the story might not be entirely accurate for 'it might not have been on the Umtata river that she had seen the vision. Maybe another river...' (it was in fact the Gxara river, further south). He points out that the real importance of his 'review' of the tale lies in his enabling the reader to understand his interpretation of 'past and present events in relation to each other', because the tragedy of the amaXhosa is 'seemingly repeating itself during this, my own lifetime' (p. 164). In saying this he looks at his Transkeian friends who are forgetting their integrity and accepting the handouts of a current Bantustan government. Rather suffer deprivation than sell your soul, is the romantic truth of his mythic reconstruction of history. The tale - he admits - 'was hard to believe'.

'For this reason', he says, 'I tried to construct my own version of the story: the conquest, the dispossession and the vision.' In admitting that he is reconstructing the tale for specific purposes Matshoba counters any charge of distorting history and allows us to debate the historical view that the killing of the cattle - brought about in frustration at colonial encroachment - actually robbed the amaXhosa of their last vestiges of power and hastened Sir George Grey's scheme of absorbing them into the Cape Colony as a subordinate labouring class. The facts of history, however, do not alter the valuable purpose of his exemplary version, in which modern-day Transkeians are exhorted not to grovel before authority.

The unusual twist to Matshoba's 'revisionary' tale is to centre interest on Nonquase as another Mantatisi, the female warrior:

She too was a woman. She sat in council with her generals, who surely were men, and they accepted her leadership. But it is said that she was of a belligerent nature, which is a rare characteristic among us women. Seeing that none of the strength of Mantatisi exists in me, I am left with but one alternative if the solution which I envisage is to be given any thought by the elders - to say that I received the message from amathongo while I was alone at the river. Alone I am indeed, and it will be hard to prove that I did not see the ancestors. In my soul I feel them, in my mind I envision them and hear their voices.

1979: 168.

Possibly there is the hint of Black Consciousness glorification here in a suggestion of the Mother Africa myth. And contradictions central to Black Consciousness emerge. Against its romantic, apocalyptic strain Matshoba invokes its communal ethic when he suggests that the preservation of the tribe, according to Nonquase's vision, depends on the attitude of the community:

'...if they share what remains, many who have already decided to opt for slavery may stay with the tribe and, perhaps with a little in their stomachs may gain some strength to till the uncultivated soil while the warriors stand a better chance to resist the plunderers...'

1979: 178.

Mhlakaza, 'her father or uncle', 'the analyst of old', supports this aspect of the girl's plea:

the sprouting of the new crops from formerly  
untilled soil will give the tribe back the hope,  
belief and strength that used to derive from  
great leaders and warriors of the past.

1979: 178.

These last-quoted passages suggest a completely different interpretation of the vision from the initial one that Matshoba gives: rather than seeing mere confusion, however, we should see Matshoba as counsellor, attempting to give his people guidance. As I have said, the ordered world of the traditional community is gone. As the modern writer, Matshoba has to try to offer inspiring alternatives in the toughness of a contemporary socio-economic world. Perhaps his 'contradictions' are a mark of his authenticity: the oral storyteller of myth and wonder faces the modern teller of tales who, in relation to the culture of the eBenzi must invoke the concept of the 'heroic tribe' as an inspiring topos rather than as a continuing alternative to life today. As he admits, 'the act [Nonquase] inspired was, unfortunately, to be the last nail in the coffin of the old way of life of the Xhosa people' (p. 184). It is hard to see how such a struggle with his material could be viewed as either 'smug political thinking' (de Kock) or 'instructing from a static situation' (Ndebele).

From his mythic interpretation Matshoba can move into graphic information as directly reinforcing communication. He gives an account of oppressive laws promulgated to disenfranchise the indigenous people, starting from 1887 up until present times, and his 'dear reader' is reminded that Sir George Grey first expressed the idea of governing blacks through their chiefs 'whose power must gradually diminish', and that many years later 'the Act of 1955 established councils along tribal lines through which Apartheid and Bantustanism were forced down the people's throats through the manipulation of the appointed chiefs...' (p. 185). Once again the full significance of an apparent digression (the story of Nonquase) becomes clear as the contemporary story unfolds. The narrator leaves the Transkei bitterly disillusioned:

I had not figured on so vast a diversity of  
awareness between the people where I came from and  
those of Umtata.

...I had actually expected people from Umtata, at  
least those with a reasonable mental training and  
financial security, the rural petty bourgeoisie who  
could afford cars, suits and beers at extortionate  
prices, to be even more outspokenly critical of the  
forces that determined their lives: more critical  
than the migrants on the bus and myself, who could

not lay claim to any 'independence'. I could not understand them at all.

1979; 186.

It is evident that a change of emphasis has taken place in the course of the telling of this tale. The way in which the narrator has been forced to alter his views may quite possibly reflect actual changes in the author as he unfolded his 'alternative' history, moving from the negritude ideal to the realization of the extreme complexity of the issues he confronts.

Matshoba's positive reinterpretation of the inexplicable self-destruction of the amaXhosa illustrates something of the resilience of the ancient value of *ubuntu* (African humanism), or communal sharing. In each of the stories in *Call Me Not a Man* he shows how this 'human' tradition remains a force in present-day life. In 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' he describes the sharing of a cigarette, and how this example of *ubuntu* has acquired so deep a significance that the expression *asibhenusan'* (we don't see eye to eye) has become a proverb in the Sotho language:

The zoll was passed around. There's nothing like sharing a smoke in times of hardship. I believe that among us a *skyf* has greater significance than giving a man some puffs when he craves them; it is a gesture of friendship, trust and respect; and if a person is prepared to offer you a smoke, it means he is freely disposed towards you and might help in other ways too.

1979: 52.

*Ubuntu* extends to the sharing of food, shelter, transport, even money. It is best summed-up by the Sotho proverb quoted by Es'kia Mphahlele in 'Grieg on Stolen Piano': 'You are because others are'. Ellen Kuzwayo, in *Call Me Woman*, translates it as 'A person is because other people are.' (I have on occasion quoted it as 'I am because others are' to emphasize the contrast with the Cartesian/Enlightenment concept of *Ergo cogito sum*. It is significant that my Western individualised version is not found anywhere in African writing.)

The binding force of a communal culture is demonstrated, again, in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana' where it is seen as a firm base for the struggle for liberation. 'What I found interesting', comments the narrator, 'was how the talk embraced all the people "at the shrine" [that is, Robben Island]' (p. 93). Friends do not only ask about the brother he is about to visit; but 'Will you see *him* too?' is a common question, and 'Greet all those you see' remains a common

injunction. The italicized *him* creates a bond between Makana, 'messiah' of the amaXhosa, and Mandela, 'messiah' of a large proportion of the present black populace of the country. Communal concern for 'all those there' emphasizes the role of the narrator as 'storyteller', or mediator, between past and present, between black individual and black society. As he moves with his audience through his stories, he both learns and teaches. Instead of distancing him from his own stories, his authorial comments -

Forgive me friends...(p. 92)

And you know what, brothers and sisters? (p. 138)

However let me not douse your interest. We shall go on in the bus to Umtata before I give my exposition. (p. 157)

have the effect of accentuating his involvement in black experience, and emphasizing his role as the voice that represents his people.

In a discussion of the short stories of Nikolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin mourns the demise, as he sees it, of the storyteller in modern times. Modern thinking, he says, has led to the isolation of the artist from the community. The rise of the novel, the production and consumption of which are essentially solitary exercises, has led to a decline in the art of storytelling. The wealth of the epic which can be handed down orally through fairytales and legends is lost in the novel, which is more concerned with individuality, with presenting elaborate and credible characters. Benjamin goes on to argue for a dichotomy between the 'experience', either at first hand or by hearsay, from which true storytellers draw their tales, and 'information', the modern technological form of communication, the prime requirement of which is that it appears 'understandable in itself'. The art of storytelling, he maintains, is to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it, whereas information is, on the other hand, 'shot through with explanation'. The psychological connections of the events [in storytelling] are not forced on the reader. It is left to him to interpret things the way he understands them (p. 89).

During the foregoing discussion of Matshoba's stories it has, I hope, become apparent that, despite a tendency to explain, he retains many qualities of the typical storyteller. A 'storyteller' is interested in practical matters. S/he tells the listener or reader something useful either by practical advice or through a moral or a proverb. The 'story' is based on experience



(his/her own or that reported by others to the teller) and the wisdom gained by this experience is passed on to those listening to the tale. In Matshoba's stories the narrator not only counsels the reader, but often plays the role of friend and adviser to the characters in the story. Each story has an exemplary quality and reflects an aspect of common experience. It treats the situation that is its subject matter as a model situation from which a lesson can be derived. Counsel ensues from interchanges based on mutuality of experience. In the South African situation, nonetheless, 'verifiability' is extremely important. In attempting to increase the impact and communicative potential of the story, a writer might want to depend partly on 'information' and partly on dramatic rendition. In an essay on Can Themba, Michael Chapman stresses

the importance of resisting any separation of the storytelling imagination from the social terrain. Rather the one interacts with the other and just as we need not give self-referring status to Themba's oft-heard claims of human and artistic autonomy, neither need we reduce the storyteller to the blueprints of sociology. In turning from Themba's subjects to his techniques, I again want to see the imagination working inseparably from social necessity, especially when Themba the author and Themba the journalist struggle to retain ideal categories of fictional truth. As a result the form of the experience strains, cracks, and seeks new reconstructions, as the apparently conflicting demands of imaginative freedom and societal commitment refuse to ignore each other.

1989: 20.

The point is that the highly politicised, unevenly 'literate' nature of South African society has placed the storyteller in the hybrid role of 'witness' as well as 'artist'. South Africa does not, of course, provide the only example of a social situation which requires such a composite approach.

Early black writers in America too had the task not only of interpreting experience, but of attempting to bring about changes to a situation of social and cultural oppression. In a comparative study of black American and black South African writing, Robert Von Rimscha demonstrates that in spite of the different cultural context and a time lapse of almost a century

life and literary representation create structures and use structures in South Africa now, similar to those prevalent in America an era ago...In the

interpretation of 'reality'... black English South African authors perceive the necessity to create ways of literarily structuring this reality which astonishingly corresponds to the concepts developed by Americans a century earlier.

1990: 21.

The following chapter, which concerns Matshoba's incomplete autobiographical novel *Beyond the Minedumps*, will deal with Von Rimscha's theory in greater detail. But a knowledge of the categories drawn from American slave narratives can, I think, assist us in analysing stories such as Matshoba's 'A Glimpse of Slavery' which, as Von Rimscha points out,

sometimes oddly mixes self-conscious remarks, class and race categories, spiritualism and anti-capitalism, a tone reminding of a pamphlet, the direct addressing of the reader, and lyrical passages...

1990: 21.

This description of the story highlights the hybrid nature of the storyteller, who mixes lyricism with the tone of a pamphlet. The tale is an amalgam of disjunctive elements which amply illustrates the difficulty of applying Benjamin's categories of 'experience' and 'information' in any dichotomous way. (As we have seen, Matshoba's stories have challenged other neat critical divisions, such as 'orality/literacy' and 'spectacular/ordinary'.)

'A Glimpse of Slavery' opens with a dramatic passage in which a magistrate convicts the narrator for striking a white man. The sentence imposed is twelve months imprisonment of which nine is conditionally suspended for three years. The narrator goes on to describe his punishment, which is almost archetypal in South Africa. His story is based on an authentic incident in the author's life, but a fictional framework allows for the incorporation of experiences familiar to many black men and first brought to public notice in 1950 by a *Drum* exposé of conditions on farms in the Bethal district, where convict labour was exploited and convicts grossly maltreated. This story was to be repeated in many variations in newspaper accounts of trials, stories by black writers, and television documentaries. Matshoba would thus have had access to any amount of information on this topic and has obviously used the information. In addition, he admits in conversation to having witnessed or experienced some of the atrocities he describes as well as having heard personal accounts of experiences on prison farms from close friends and relatives. No clear division between information and experience, therefore, can be

seen to exist. (More recently, the subject of convict labour on farms has been dealt with in feature films such as 'A Place of Weeping' by Anant Singh and 'Hidden Farms', which is an adaptation of 'A Glimpse of Slavery' by Kenneth Kaplan.)

The narrator in 'A Glimpse of Slavery' is imprisoned in Modderbee prison near Johannesburg, where he is

accorded a human enough status in that we were  
dressed in proper clothes and corporal punishment  
was not prescribed...entitled to two meals...  
and were certain of sleeping with blankets.

1979: 41.

Short-term prisoners cannot, however, expect to enjoy these 'luxuries' because it suits the state to hire them out to local farmers. The narrator is 'picked out' from a line of convicts and offered as cheap labour to Koos de Wet, a stereotyped 'boer', large, uncouth and cruel, who is assisted by a typical black 'sell-out' nicknamed by his 'baas' as 'Bobbejaan' (p. 32). The narrator portrays himself as an ordinary black worker who is caught in an unjust situation even as he displays acute self-consciousness of himself as an artist: someone who, in spite of Ndebele's reservations, has transcended the limitations of his archetypal role of 'suffering peasant'. He quotes from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', he refers to the 'witches in *Macbeth*', he makes classical allusions, and generally goes out of his way to prove himself not only literate, but literary. At the same time, traces of an oral culture are revealed in his use of an episodic structure as well as in his reliance on local myths, highly metaphorical language, and a vernacular idiom. As we saw in earlier stories, the various episodes reinforce images of experience found in other stories in order to build a conglomerate picture comprising motifs of typical black life. The narrator's individual experience, although it could be deemed exceptional by whites, has become the *ordinary* reality for blacks. Spectacular incidents such as the flogging of convicts, and psychological terror in a scene in which the farmer, de Wet, forces the narrator to drape a dead snake around his neck, are interspersed with accounts by the prisoners of their everyday lives. Their discussions usually presume a black readership which is politicized. On the occasions that Matshoba seems to speak to a white reader, it is to remind whites of the greater depth of social awareness among those who have borne the brunt of oppression:

You might be surprised that an ordinary farm

labourer and a group of jailbirds dressed in sackcloth could talk about things that are usually reserved for so-called sophisticated scholars' minds. It is among the simple, despised people who feel the pinch of injustice...that one finds the wisdom that is gathered with harsh experience.

1979: 54.

As Ong has noted,

Oral folks assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes but as situated in operational contexts.

1989: 55.

Although he repeatedly asserts his 'book learning', the narrator also affirms his place in ordinary black society. The quoted passage seems to reaffirm the 'common experience' of black people who are lumped together as an homogeneous group, especially in the jails, with no regard for differences in education or degrees of criminality.

Following Von Rimscha, I have suggested that a knowledge of American slave narrative may be useful in assisting us to understand the significance of a story such as 'A Glimpse of Slavery'. Indeed, in this story Matshoba deliberately equates the conditions on South African farms which employ convict labour with conditions of slavery. The title introduces the link which is further reinforced by the narrator:

My Standard Three teacher had taught me that slavery was abolished way back in eighteen thirty three in South Africa. He was lying, and those who had told him that had fed him a lot of bunkum too.

1979: 37.

...no, not prisoner, slave. Because at Traanfontein we were flayed of even our prison status, which was, at least, still human.

1979: 41.

His experiences as a slave on De Wet's farm can be recognized as the topos developed in the slave narrative trope: autobiographical details give the author credibility, proclaim him as existent; he survives inhuman conditions and proves his potential to transcend these conditions by voicing his response to them; he is subjected to physical and psychological cruelty, as well as

to starvation; and he is whipped and then terrified when De Wet insists that he wrap the snake around his neck. He plans an escape to freedom. Education and literacy are seen as crucial for the liberation from slavery, but the value of the type of education given to the black student is bitterly questioned. Bobbejaan, the black overseer in 'A Glimpse of Slavery', represents the typical 'Uncle Tom', a 'sell out' to white dominance. The hero is critical of religion, renounces the institutional church and questions the values of a system of beliefs which has only entrenched oppression. In this story, the typical 'Battle Royal' of the slave narrative occurs in the form of a fight between the black hero and his white 'owner'. 'It was not a white man I was belting', asserts the narrator, emphasizing that his battle is against injustice rather than against the white man himself.

In the South African context the escape of the hero cannot - or, at least, in 1979 could not - be an escape to freedom. It cannot be the act of gaining, defining, sustaining, and extending the self that it used to be for American slave narrators:

Physical freedom is nearly purposeless where economic self-determination - the kind of self-appropriation Baker held to be central for the slave narrators' motivation - is made impossible by the complex structures of modern society.

von Rimscha, 1990: 17.

Escape is symbolic and economic self-possession limited to one aspect: symbolically defining a self and stating it in public discourse. This self-definition creates a conflict between the two claims of the narrator: the one that he is different, special, an educated, literary man; the other that he is a representative of his community. Von Rimscha shows that black writers overcome this conflict by a 'topos of unmentionability' (p. 10). Expressions such as 'there is no telling what happened', 'words cannot describe', 'paper is too weak to carry the burden of what I witnessed', suggest something beyond the ordinary reach of human language. By telling what 'cannot be told' the authors emphasize their special position at the same time as they mediate between the unmentionable horror of reality and the conventions of literature. In all Matshoba's stories the tension between specialness and representativeness is evident. The narrator in 'A Glimpse of Slavery' repeatedly draws attention to his ability to transcend the slave condition; at the same time, he emphasizes that he is a victim of the economics of slavery, and a representative

of an oppressed people.

Houston Baker, in fact, identifies the 'economics of slavery' as one of the central tropes of slave narrative, and Matshoba addresses this theme in many of his stories as he shows how the perversion of education in South Africa furthers the capitalist aims of the oppressors. The subject is discussed at length in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana'. In 'A Glimpse of Slavery' it becomes the topic of a debate among the convicts on De Wet's farm and is used by the narrator to demonstrate, once again, that the situation is not simply that blacks are oppressed by whites, but that the system has led to the corruption of many black people who have chosen to 'hunt with the wolves':

'Here starts the second day of slavery,' sighed Thabo as we started off to the granary.

'Every day of your life has been a day of slavery. You were born for that,' I corrected him.

'If only I had gone to school when I was young. I would not be here now; I would be in an office working with a phone and a pen,' Thabo went on.

'Ha! You'd still be serving, and you'd still not be satisfied. That would just be another form of slavery. Leashed with a tie to a desk doing the same thing half your life to make a white millionaire even richer. When a black person goes to school he does it in order to earn a certificate to serve at a better place, not for the sake of gaining knowledge to use for the betterment of his own people or to widen his scope of thinking so as to be able to analyse the world and find himself a place in it. We who serve the harder way with physical labour need not go to school for it, that is, there are no certificates sold to dig trenches and sweep streets.'

...I answered.

My words sparked off some interest in Jabulani, the man who has started the whip dance the previous day. 'What about doctors and lawyers? Don't they work for themselves, those people? They don't serve anybody, *mos*.'

'You're absolutely right - they don't serve anybody but themselves. The doctors rob sick people and the lawyers make money out of the distress and ignorance of people. Both have a common aim of leading jet-set lives and looking down upon other people ...'

'Of course you might be right, *mfo*,' agreed one of the other two men. 'You know, people don't trust the educated because the hunt with the wolves and

graze with the sheep, mostly.'

The fifth man also broke his reticence: 'Ya - who can trust them when they keep only to their "high societies" and boast to the people about the money they make? They live on whisky, champagne, women and lust; vice is the mark of many an "educated" person. It must be disappointing for some of the old men who worked their hearts almost to a standstill to buy their children what they never had themselves, an education which they hoped their sons and daughters would use to recover what was lost by our forefathers.'

'So you agree with me that education or rather knowledge is used by blacks only to serve whites, if not to steal from their own borthers who have not had the same opportunities to go to school for many reasons that are beyonf their control,' I said, trying to drive my point home but not knowing the right way to put it.

'The betterment of mankind is a dead virtue. Educated people should be an investment in the gutures of those around them, but it is they who are posing the greatest threat to the dignity of man with their class consciousness. Instead of raising the man at the bottom, they tend to keep him there for fleecing, or deliver him to white wolves for fleecing,' Jabulani concluded.

We would have liked to pursue the subject further but had arrived where we were going to work.

1979: 48-49

Matshoba's sceptical outlook on education and educated people has been demonstrated in other stories. Here he consolidates his views by showing that the struggle of the black man cannot be waged only in terms of black/white relations, but must be directed against class systems as well. The lesson of Nonquase's tale is reinforced: blacks who 'eat at the white man's table' will ensure the continuing enforcement of oppression, and make liberation of the common man impossible.

The story, 'To Kill a Man's Pride', although not included in Matshoba's collection, provides a useful addition to his story cycle. Here the narrator is not directly a victim of the degradation he describes, for he experiences the horrors of hostel life merely through visits to a hostel (which he names 'Auschwitz') with Somdali, a friend he has met at work. He makes it clear nevertheless that he identifies with the suffering of the hostel inmates, taking their shame as part of the black man's burden through which his pride is 'killed'. Once again it is



apparent that Matshoba has not concentrated only on piling 'fact upon fact of oppression'. Significantly, he draws to the reader's attention the small joys and celebrations experienced by the inmates of these 'pigsties' and he thus attests to the 'humanity' and 'resilience' of men whose pride has been severely damaged. This tone of hope is the major difference between American slave narrative and the work of South African black writers. The American slave was usually portrayed as the 'dejected peasant' (in Ndebele's words). Most South African writers, by contrast, stress the resilience of black people under oppression, and imply that their resilience will eventually allow them to resist subjugation.

'To Kill a Man's Pride' begins with a factual description of the hostels of Soweto, comparing them to Nazi concentration camps and distinguishing them from the common conception of a hostel as an 'establishment along Salvation Army lines' (1980: 103). This detailed description is a necessary glossary for anyone who does not have personal experience of these hostels. (Never having seen Auschwitz I can say that the Soweto hostels are the most degrading living quarters it is possible to imagine, especially now in 1991, when they are ringed with barricades of razor wire.) The story incorporates the recurrent references of the collection: the train journey, the 'staffrider', the pass office, the kaffir/baas exchange, and so on:

The train brought the free morning stuntman show.  
The daredevils ran along the roof of the train,  
a few centimetres from the naked cable carrying  
thousands of electric volts, and ducked under  
every pylon. One missed step, a slip - and reflex  
action would send his hand clasp for support.  
No comment from any of us at the station.  
The train shows have been going on since time  
immemorial and have lost their magic.

1980: 108.

When Mphahlele speaks of Matshoba's prose as 'lacking memorable diction', we can only conclude that he had not read 'To Kill a Man's Pride'. For this perhaps has more wry humour and throw-away lines than any other of Matshoba's stories.

In the description of the train journey from Mzimhlope to Faraday Station, the cliché 'to hang on for dear life' is revitalized:

The spaces between adjacent coaches were filled  
with people. So the only way I could get on the  
train was by wedging myself among those hanging on

perilously by hooking their fingers into the narrow runnels along the tops of the coaches, their feet on the door ledges. A slight wandering of the mind, a sudden swaying of the train as it switched lines, bringing the weight of the others on top of us, a lost grip - and another labour unit would be abruptly terminated. We hung on for dear life until Faraday.

1980: 108.

In this passage we also see Matshoba refuting Vaughan by confirming that he is well aware that Europeans have disrupted a material and discursive universe based on use-value and replaced it with one dominated by exchange-value.

At Faraday, Mtutu (this is the only story in which the narrator has Matshoba's own name) is on 'trial' for a position on the paper guillotine of 'Detail Die-cut Ltd.', which is owned by a Mr Pieters. When Mtutu asks Somdali how long he is likely to have to endure the 'trial', Somdali replies:

Two, three weeks - Pieters decides. But *ag*, it's one way to get free labour out of people before they register them....Pieters takes the good-looking girls away in his VW stationwagon to 'clean his house' before he registers them. Some of the girls are married. When their husbands want to talk to them on the phone, or come looking for them after work, he refers to them as 'boyfriends'.

1980: 106.

(One is reminded of how Dawid Steenkamp in 'A Son of the First Generation' refers to May's husband as her 'boyfriend'.)

During the interview Pieters is sketched as one of Matshoba's best 'verbal cartoons':

leaning back in a regal flexible armchair, his hairy legs (the skin of which curiously made me think of a frog's ventral side) balanced on the edge of the desk in the manner of a sheriff in an old-fashioned western, my blue-eyed, slightly bald, jackal-faced overlord.

1980: 108.

The animal features given to this stock human character creates a vivid impression of both

Pieters' appearance and his character. In many of his stories Matshoba refers to his early yearning to paint:

When I was a small boy I wanted to be an artist, a painter. Unfortunately my parents wanted me to go to school and qualify for a white collar job, to be a *mabhalane* (clerk) they said, instead of sitting around the whole day drawing pictures... Many a talented youngster is brutally suppressed by parents who look upon their children as assets, parents who were brought up accepting that to be in the paid service of the white man is the only form of work...

'A Glimpse of Slavery' 1979: 63.

Ursula Barnett sees in his talent for drawing 'narrative cartoons' a realization of Matshoba's dream:

Pictorial art had been Matshoba's first love as a youngster and perhaps cartoons would have been his forte.

1983: 217.

(Twelve years after publishing his collection of short stories Matshoba walked out on his 'white collar job' as a translator in a language bureau and is devoting himself to painting oils depicting life in Soweto, while continuing with the writing of his novel.)

The 'cartoon character', Pieters, asks if Mtutu has a 'pass'. 'Yee Mister Pieters', answers Mtutu, observing, in a ironic aside which sums up the way in which so many 'liberal' employers delude themselves, 'that one did not want to be called baas.' The interview continues: 'Let me see it. I hope it's the right one. You got a permit to work in Johannesburg?' Mtutu replies: 'I was born here, Mister Pieters'. Pieters' rejoinder, 'It doesn't follow', illustrates the anomalous and iniquitous system of labour exchange which was practised in South Africa (until the abolition of the pass laws), whereby a man had no automatic right to seek work in the place of his birth.

At 80 Albert Street, the pass office, Mtutu's exchanges with the clerks show the same humorous irony. But these characters, both black and white, are treated more harshly. A 'snarling white boy' with a 'weak jaw' is 'not prepared to use any other language than his own' and Mtutu cannot help feeling that 'at his age, about twenty, he should be at RAU learning to speak the other languages' (1980: 109). As the clerk 'laboriously writes his pass numbers',

Mtutu - in an ironic reversal of roles in terms of South African racial mythology - thinks again: 'he should still be at school, learning to write properly' (p. 110). The black clerk is described without humour or irony as a 'blackjack' with 'bloodshot eyes, as big as a cow's and as stupid', with 'gaping nostrils and sagging belly, his breath fouled with *mai-mai*'. This is prose that comes close to what Mphahlele calls 'prose that goes straight to the visible target'. It also illustrates the tendency of black South African politics to be scornfully dismissive of white oppressors while venting outright hatred towards any black 'sellout' - a phenomenon that is displayed in the dreadful slaughter of black town councillors and black policemen at a time when most black people acknowledge the necessity of tolerance and forgiveness.

After this digression on the labour situation, which has provided many examples of the methods by which a man's pride can be killed, the reader may begin to wonder what the function of the introductory description of the hostels might be. The narrative returns to the topic of the hostels, however, to show that of the many ways to destroy a man's pride, 'one sure way is to take a man and place him in a Soweto hostel' (p. 103). Mtutu visits the hostel at the invitation of Somdali and is 'shocked' at the 'unspeakable living conditions' never having had to 'partake' in 'the squalor' before. His description of the hostel conditions of 1979 causes one to wonder why it took over ten years for the situation to erupt into full-scale violence between hostel inmates and the local residents:

A few inmates...went out to mix with the location people... others formed bands who invaded the location at night solely to rape and kill, so that there was someone lying dead somewhere in the small location once every week. This gave the hostel people a formidableness that made it difficult to befriend them or to sympathize with their terrible lot. The bulk of the inmates chose to stay 'inside' at weekends, filling the emptiness of their lives with alcohol and traditional song that brought the nostalgia for the place of their birth, the broken hopelessness of which had driven them to gather scraps in the jungles of Johannesburg. Murder was also rife inside. Dehumanized people lose their concern for life.

'We live like hogs, wild dogs or any other neglected animal. The pets of *abelungu* live better than we', Somdali would say.

1980: 115.

Here Matshoba echoes a theme of black literature most horrifyingly depicted in Mphahlele's 'Mrs Plum', in which a 'liberal' white 'madam' shows that she has greater concern for her two lapdogs than for the humans who work for her.

A reader might be forgiven at this point for feeling that Matshoba has lost the tone of wry humour with which he started the story and has become overwhelmed by the 'spectacular', thus giving way to what Ndebele calls

the image of a totally debased people whose only  
reason for existence [in literature] is to  
receive the sympathy of the world.

1984b: 73.

This impression is compounded by further distressing details of the stench, dirt and degradation of the hostels. There is no doubt that Matshoba is seeking the 'sympathy of the world'. At the same time, he incorporates into his tale of misery moments of transcendence, instances of sharing and giving, of 'a certain organization in the way they lived', which is demonstrated by the delegation of chores, the washing of utensils, and the sweeping of the living quarters. After eating 'they played a moving "*mbaqanga*" for 'song was the only solace of those lonely people':

At least two days a week they sang traditional  
choral music. Some of the songs were performed  
with graceful dances, so elegantly carried out  
that I wondered where they could all have learned  
the same paces. After an evening of invigorating  
talk and untainted African traditional song I went  
away feeling as if I had found treasure in a  
graveyard.

1980: 123.

The following four pages of the story are devoted to the exciting gambling games, the songs and dances, the religious gatherings, the flute playing of the ba'Pedi, and the foot-stomping of the Zulus: descriptions of activities which seem to qualify the pessimism of the preceding pages. Finally the story ends, like the dances, on a note of peace and satisfaction intimating, perhaps, hope for the sunrise of the future. The final picture, then, is not that of a broken people:

The drum, the clapping hands, songs, shouts of

'usuthu', and the rising and falling legs went on  
and on, the muscular and wiry black bodies  
glistening with sweat until sunset, when the sun  
would lie on Meadowlands like a glowing  
half-circle, and the smoke from the chimneys would  
blanket the slumbering Soweto.

1980: 127.

(Parties in Soweto start at about 3pm because food takes a long time to prepare, but the preparation is an integral part of the celebration and is shared by everyone. As a result, the party is well underway when sundown comes, especially in summer. Sundown in Soweto has a special quality because it suggests a sharp contrast with the violence, tension and aggression of the day. The peace might be an illusion, but it strikes one as tangible. Analysis cannot quite account for the mood. Perhaps this is the crucial point: one has to share the experience to appreciate the force of Matshoba's closing sequence. For the white reader, perhaps, participation in the experience rather than the reading about it is the real way to decolonise our minds.)

In all the stories of the cycle, Matshoba reveals shifts in structuring processes suggesting difficult, even imperfect transitions from orality to literacy. Crucially, he is able to analyze abstract concepts while retaining an understanding of older, empathetic ways of conceptualising experiences. The formal manifestations might at first seem awkward to Western-trained readers of fiction; I have tried to argue, however, for the impact of stories which explore a period of growth and change, not only in the writer but in his society. The tension between African humanist and Black Consciousness ideals, between the impulses of male chauvinism and the ideals of feminism, between a desire to blame capitalism for all the evils of the South African political system and the 'petty bourgeois' inability to follow a rigorous socialist alternative to its conclusions, can be seen as symptomatic of the shift taking place in black politics in the late 1970s from identifications with black solidarity to the promise of a non-racial future. To dismiss Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* on the basis of a rigid insistence on Western written expectations of 'unity of impression' is to lose sight of the significance of his kind of 'literary' intervention.

## Chapter Two

### Novel: Beyond the Minedumps

In Chapter One I focused on the need to suspend entrenched critical attitudes in order to allow those texts which have been produced under specific cultural and historical conditions to reveal their own significance in relation to their context of production. Matshoba was granted his own intentions, in writing his stories, as being a desire to show 'my side, the black side', in which he (or his narrator) aligned himself with other suffering blacks across the world. In the course of analysing Matshoba's short stories, I suggested that a knowledge of American slave narrative might lend added insight into South African texts written against a similar background of subjugation, and I identified the most significant theme of slave narrative as the search for the recognition of a unique identity reflected in the choice of first-person narration. Most South African black writers have made such a narrative choice. In this chapter I intend to examine Matshoba's fictional autobiography in order to show that the choice of this form can be ascribed to a dual need on the part of black authors: to seek recognition of themselves as individuals, and to valorize a 'black' voice in literature. I will suggest that it is profitable to study works by black writers, whatever their nationality, in their own literary context. Black writing is seen to have common historical roots which have influenced both theme and style, often in different ways. For instance, writers have shown the influence of the Anglo-American tradition by different reactions depending on the historical period during which they wrote: in earlier colonial times by emulation, later by rejection or parody. This is not to suggest a 'black epistemology' dependent on a 'black essence', but a 'black experience' which differs because of historical factors. It is one that needs a mode of expression which will not coincide with the imaginative expression of other cultures, and it calls therefore for a different and appropriate critical perspective. I also hope to show that it is this very distinctiveness in the works and in the critical perspective they demand that challenges the current institutions of power in the literary world.

The perceived loss of identity caused by colonial impositions is a concern voiced in most black writing. Nostalgic calls by Black Consciousness for a return to the supposedly idyllic past in order to recover a pure pre-colonial black identity are obviously impracticable, historically false, and have to be interpreted as mythic, or strategic, necessity. This does not, however,



invalidate the need felt by black writers to identify 'an African Imagination' (Abiola Irele); 'an African voice' (Esk'ia Mphahlele); 'a black critical theory' (Henry Louis Gates Jnr.). There is of course a danger here of replicating colonial assumptions in constructing black life as essentialist and not historically differentiated. The critics mentioned here are all aware of the trap, but would argue for the need (in oppressive circumstances) to posit the ideal of reconstructed subjectivity. Such a psychological, social, and literary myth of blackness is seen not only as a necessary means of escaping the constraints imposed by white thought, but also as a rejection of the European mimicry of neo-colonialism: it is a 'strategic essentialism' (to borrow a term from Spivak), or to quote Gates, 'a transcendent signified, in order to help break through the enclosure of blackness' (1984: 7).

In the course of analysing an unpublished work by Mtutuzeli Matshoba, *Beyond the Minedumps* (abbreviated to MD for page references), I propose to examine the status of the 'black subject' in 'black writing'. I hope to show that the black writer, while acknowledging that subjectivity is culturally constructed, is entitled to demand representation of his/her reconstructed identity, however mediated it may be by social practices and language. Matshoba's narrator in the title story of *Call Me Not a Man* had already claimed a dual role as writer and representative figure, as he linked himself to other black communities across the world:

Only a shell of me remains to tell you of the  
other man's plight, which is in fact my own. For  
what is suffered by another man in view of my eyes  
is suffered also by me... To the same chaingang do  
we belong.

1979: 18.

This reinforces the impression that these writers are not claiming a black essence, but recognize a 'black identity' shaped by social determinants, and it is an indication of how Matshoba intends to represent this identity: by telling of his experiences and those he witnesses. In his short stories he used a fictional narrator to relate events he has experienced, witnessed, or of which he has been informed by reliable witnesses. As he said, he sees himself as belonging to 'the same chaingang' as any other suffering black person, which gives him the authority of the experiential voice in his stories. In 1989 Matshoba completed, but did not publish, his fictional autobiography *Beyond the Minedumps*. The story follows the life of the 'author' from birth until

he enters high school. In this case Matshoba acknowledges that the story is autobiographical; hence it can legitimately be seen as the representation of an individual. Any autobiography contains elements of fiction because it will be subjective and selective; but in this work Matshoba also chooses to tell his story through a fictional narrator. This ploy can be seen as a reinscription of his role as representative, not only of his own community but of black people everywhere, rather than as an attempt to claim the fictional status of the novel for this work.

Matshoba intended to produce a social documentary of 'black life' in South Africa in the 1950s, but because of the momentous changes taking place in South African politics in the 1990s he has decided to extend the story to include his mature life (he turned forty in May 1990). The implications of this decision support the notion of storytelling as a process, the unfolding of an epic, which reflects the life of a community through the life of an individual. In the foreword to *Beyond the Minedumps* Matshoba coins the phrase 'participative research':

I have heard people tell of what happened to their  
lives, I have seen things happen to people's lives,  
things have happened to my life, among the people.  
This then is the story of the people, a mixture of  
hearsay and experience, of many people in one, and  
one person in many.

MD: i.<sup>1</sup>

Here he confirms his role as spokesperson for his people, who, while developing himself in his personal account, recuperates the alternative history which has been effaced by the dominant culture.

As the manuscript is unavailable it seems necessary, first, to give an outline of the 'story'.<sup>2</sup> *Beyond the Minedumps* is the tale of Thandisizwe, born in Soweto, of Xhosa parents. His mother is a nurse at Baragwanath, his father comes and goes, has some unspecified employment during the time he is home, and is deeply involved in 'the struggle'. He refuses to carry the 'dompas' and assures his wife, who fears for his safety, that if he dies for the cause, she will be able to

continue with life with the proud knowledge that  
the father of the house died because he would  
rather die than succumb to inhuman laws and maybe  
my sons'll pick up my spear where I fell and  
proceed to war for, I'm telling you Mama, a lot of  
blood is still going to be shed to bring this  
minority regime to its senses. Right now, there's  
talk of forming *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, a Spear of the

Nation, in some Congress ranks seeing that talking and peaceful protests hardly evoke any response among our foreign rulers.

MD: 13-14.

When he is six years old, Thandi starts school at 'Salvation', a 'little church house opposite Mahala and next to Orlando stadium which was being built...' (p. 32). He starts in 'Dom A' (stupid sub-standard A) where he encounters, for the first time, the effects of racial segregation within the black community. After 'Sub B' he moves to the Mzimhlope Community school, 'Sandagastins', where he progresses from Standard One to Standard Six. He is compelled to attend both 'bible lessons' and church, and to the adults who knew him he 'passed as an ideal boy child'. The events of this period are recounted in minute detail and we are led through the life of a little boy growing to puberty: his early sexual experiences; the innocent yet criminal pranks of the 'Gang'; his relationship with his mother and siblings; and the acquisition of knowledge gleaned through eavesdropping on adult conversations, prying on adult activities, or reading his father's *Drum* magazines. At the completion of Standard Six, Thandi 'qualifies for grey flannel long-pants and shoes everyday'. He has proved himself to be 'clever' and his 'Mama' applies for his admission to boarding school. His father would prefer to send him to Lovedale - 'a world-renowned institution...in the land of his forefathers [now the Ciskei]' - but his mother chooses Wilberforce, because Evaton 'is just next door' (p. 198). Despite being a devout Anglican, she takes Thandi to the inyanga (medicine-man) for 'strengthening', before he enters adult life. The story ends with Thandi's arrival by train at Evaton station, a change which his father fears 'will be like taking him out of one slum and putting him into another' (p. 198).

In the course of the story particular emphasis is placed on the role of education in the black child's life. The South African education system is examined and discussed at length, and its value in the liberation struggle is queried as the narrator comes to realize how schooling can be used to reinforce subjugation. The very young Thandi 'yearned to be a pupil' at 'Sandagastins'. He wanted 'to become one with [the] location's child community, and quench [his] thirst for wisdom', but discovered that he needed more than wisdom to be accepted into a white-dominated world.

Franz Fanon notes that the intellectual who has discovered that the acquisition of white skills still does not qualify him for entrance into a white culture, will then try to 'reach for the

universal' to prove that he is a 'Man' by creating himself in print (1967: 226). According to Robert Von Rimscha the writer's need for a culture in order to create an autobiographical setting for his narratology is

because there is no place for metaphysical  
symbolism or writing of any other kind where the  
self, the black self, is constantly endangered,  
physically, spiritually, culturally, and where  
thus the assertion of a self comes to be the prime  
function of writing. In black literature, in a  
white dominated discourse, the individual's  
existence has to be justified, not its specialness.  
Where literature means claiming a place,  
autobiographical writing is the first step.

1990: 8.

Comparative studies of African and Afro-American writing identify first-person narration, autobiography and fictional autobiography as concepts at the 'core' of black writing, although numerous other features help to distinguish black writing too. These core features would seem to fall within the standards of mainstream Western art in that they place an emphasis on individuality, but an analysis of black writing reveals that autobiographical writing can serve purposes other than that of individual self-assertion. In the traditional Western autobiography, the author proves his or her uniqueness by portraying personal experiences as different and special, the written word testifying to this specialness. The autobiography does not only recreate the genesis of a self, but of a self which has achieved some status above or different from its peers, and examines how such a state has been reached, tracing its path back into childhood. Consequently, typical Western autobiographies are written by persons who have become famous, or who consider themselves unique and therefore noteworthy: individuals who have excelled in art, in politics, in sport, or perhaps even in crime. Black autobiography serves a different purpose. It does not retell the events of a unique self, but creates a 'self' where white-dominated society has tried to ensure that, in the case of the black person, the 'self' does not exist. Autobiography in the black narrative tradition is not merely a generic vehicle to affirm superiority. Rather it affirms representativeness, by narrating the typical, the ordinary life story. It exemplifies the 'African imagination' and the 'African voice' described by Irele and Mphahlele. The 'self' emerging in fiction is a 'universal' concept in the Western tradition but for writers who have been dominated by an alien tradition it is specifically an emergence from

'negated' to 'existent' rather than from 'average' to 'special'. This explains why many black writers start rather than end their careers with autobiographical writing. It is also associated with social bonds and is not an assertion of individuality, which accounts for the fact that such writings often extend over a lengthy period, and into a number of volumes, emerging as a process rather than a product. The use of a fictional framework for autobiographical writing serves, therefore, to underline the representativeness of the narrative rather than its uniqueness. Furthermore, the idea of a unique personal identity is now widely recognised in post-structuralist theory as a cultural mystification, and the notion of the author can no longer be conceived of as that of an autonomous creator of his/her own identity or text.

In the search for identity, in *Beyond the Minedumps*, the history of education is repeated in the hero's growth from ignorance (Dom-A), ascribed to the social deprivation of his early years, towards literacy and self-consciousness. On Thandi's first day at school he suffers a crisis of identity concerning his name. This topos is reflected in the titles of works by many black writers, both American and South African (examples are *Invisible Man* and *Call Me Not a Man*), and is also common in South African poetry. It painfully illustrates the indignity inflicted on black persons who have been 're-christened' with names such as: John; Sarah; Ruth; Maria; Sophia; or Matthew. On reciting his name, 'Thandisizwe Nxele', to the schoolmistress Thandi is asked: 'Your schoolname?' He considers offering: 'James, John, Reuben, Jacob, Steven', but decides to remain silent. 'He does not have it, Mistress', says sis Nombuyiselo. 'Why don't he?', asks the teacher, 'was he not baptised?' (p. 33). When asked his father's name Thandi can proffer only his father's Xhosa name. He is instructed 'to find out Tata's school name...'. 'He does not go to school, mistress', a puzzled Thandi replies. 'Yes, I know, but what is his white name, *igama lakhe lesilungu?*', insists the teacher. A few days later the interrogation continues: 'Did you ask for your and your father's "European" names, like I said?'. Thandi recalls

how irate his Tata had become when sis Nombuyiselo had conveyed the teacher's request for our names.

'What!' he had exclaimed, ... 'What!' ... and looked disbelievingly from Nombuyiselo to me... 'Mos Thandisizwe's your name, Thandi. What's the matter with it?'

'Mistress wants another name that'll show I was baptised', I had explained. Tata had chuckled and shook his head from side to side. 'Ya! It's true when *amadoda* say that we have so much lost our self-esteem that we fear to be called by our real

names. What a shame! Even our teachers, people who we rely on to carry the lantern and show the way, are making my boy ashamed of himself because he hasn't got *igama lesiLungu*...

'*Mamela kakule*' he commanded... 'your name is Thandisizwe. Finish 'n klaar. Hear?...

And if that mistress of yours wants to know why, tell her it's because at your home you're African...'

MD: 35.

Matshoba goes on to illustrate the divisive effects of 'ethnic' education. When Thandi is asked for his tribal nationality he answers: 'Zulu'. He is ashamed to admit that he is Xhosa 'because they said the Xhosa said "*into yomntu ngeyam*", which meant they stole so much they regarded all other people's property as their own' and also because 'Zulu was the predominantly universal identity' (p. 34).<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, when Thandi arrives at Mzimhlope school, he decides to keep the fictitious names he had been compelled to give himself and his father,

to avoid being ridiculed as a heathen two years previously at substandard A. I [had also] declared my mother tongue as Zulu instead of Xhosa because I was ashamed of having been born into a tribe that justified its characteristic kleptomania by saying '*Into yomntu ngeyam*,' meaning that every possession was communal and could be taken from one at any time.

MD: 7.

Outside 'Sandagastins' school a 'granny' sells 'fatcakes' and 'mashangan polony' - so-called because it was

low-grade polony and in those days of ignorance the Shangan people were looked down on and accorded the lowliest of things. To us children there was no degradation worse than 'You're black as a Shangan'. Looking back I now think the Shangan were merely despised for the fact that they were among those of our black folk who still clung uncompromisingly to their tradition, when tradition was equated with savagery.

MD: 34.

This description attests to the insidiousness of the infiltration of 'apartheid' ideology which encouraged division among blacks while emphasizing the desirability of 'white' standards.

That such ideas of racial hierarchy are not confined to South Africa is confirmed by an observation made by Franz Fanon: that Antillean school children, when reading of 'savages', automatically thought of Senagalese, until they went to Paris and learned that they themselves were considered to be 'savages' (1952: 148).

School apartheid in Soweto was somewhat haphazardly applied:

We were regimented into our respective classes according to ethnic classification. The Nguni, that is, Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi Sub A and B who were going to study through the Zulu medium to one side and the Sotho, Pedi and Tswana group, to learn in South Sotho, to the other. The Shangan and the Venda could join any side they chose, or as space allowed.

MD: 34.

Later, when Thandi's father wishes him to go to Lovedale College because their family is Xhosa, Thandi thinks: 'I don't want to be traditional because traditional is primitive' (p. 198). The dialectic between the traditional as primitive and the traditional seen as pride in ancestral roots extends throughout the novel, with Thandi representing the attitude of the indoctrinated product of the South African education system, and his father counteracting his distorted vision by emphasizing the need for pride in his ancestry, a pride which he considers to be crucial to regaining a sense of personal worth. He thus challenges Thandi's school-learned versions of biblical stories and African history, and offers his own revised version of each tale, based partly on oral folk-lore.

The interrogation of history and religion, as they have been imposed by the dominant culture, can be seen as an important strategy in the search for a black identity. Thandi has been raised as a Christian but becomes critical of religion. His mother equates obedience with Christianity and

doesn't like the way [he carries] on like a child from a home without rules...

'Next thing we'll hear you're riding staff on trains.' I hold my breath. She is treading on disturbing ground...

'But Momma, I never ride staff on trains.'

'You soon will if you keep vanishing whole days...with nobody knowing...what you're up to. And, what's more I want you in church every Sunday.'

Other children your age are already training as  
altar boys while you're running around doing God  
knows what.' I suppress an urge to scream out at  
her that I have far more exciting interests than  
religious rituals the purpose of which is to  
instil a perpetual guilt complex in gullible  
innocent souls.

MD: 129.

The critical attitude hardens as he grows older and observes the hypocrisy of most professed adherents to religious dogma. It is obvious that Matshoba is developing the character of Thandi from that of schoolboy, who finds religion irrelevant because it interferes with his playtime, to that of sceptical, self-aware individual who begins to realize the significance, for himself and for other black people, of the imposition of the white man's religion. Thandi's father, 'Tata', is also critical of Christianity, which he equates with white domination. Thandi asks his father how the great warriors such as Shaka, Dingane, Mzilawgazi, and Bhambatha had been conquered: 'Was it because their adversaries were superior in body and mind?' In his reply Tata gives Thandi a graphic personal version of the effects that the introduction of Christianity has had on African history and religion:

*'Haya nyana'*, Tata refused [denied],  
'they beguiled the forefathers with the bible.  
It is said that they gave the people the bible  
with one hand and took the land with the other.  
Others say that they asked the forefathers to  
close their eyes and pray, and by the time they  
finished and opened their eyes the land and  
everything else that was on it had changed  
ownership.

MD: 24.

Later Tata chides Thandi's mother for referring to his employers as 'umlungu wani' (your whites):

'It's this religion of yours too; that teaches you  
to reject your ancestral worship as paganism,  
which amounts to self-rejection because rejecting  
...one's own ancestors and adopting European saints,  
their ancestors as intermediaries between you and  
the creator has created such a false dependence  
on white salvation that you have internalized them



in your souls, hence 'my white', 'your white',  
'our whites', with deifying adoration. If you claim  
ownership of something it means you value it.'

MD: 137.

It is evident that Matshoba is reflecting, through Tata and Thandi, his own growth towards self-consciousness and rejection of domination. He further reveals the tensions that have been created in black persons such as Thandi's mother, who try to satisfy white expectations and demands. (The stilted expression of this passage is another illustration of how Matshoba, in trying to place learned speech in the mouth of his father, strives to disprove the white person's view of blacks as primitive.) In spite of her Christian beliefs, Thandi's mother takes him to the inyanga, before he goes to boarding school, to be 'fortified against sorcery'. Thandi, when he was ill as a baby, had been 'touched' by this same holy man and, as a result, his mother believed, he had 'never been laid down by illness' (p. 209). Tat'omkulu throws the bones while 'Mama' chants to the 'custodians of the house'. The bones show that Thandi is well-protected by the ancestors and, after advising Thandi's mother to defer Thandi's 'initiation' until he is an adult, the medicine man gives him a 'strengthening potion'. Tata's accusation that Thandi's mother has rejected the ancestors is proved, in part, to be unfounded. She says:

*'Unyanisele Tat'u Mkize, when it comes to  
spiritual matters one finds the best fulfilment  
among one's own people, for it is among one's  
own people that one's concerns are best understood.'*

MD: 209.

The reconciliation of Christian and ancient beliefs by Thandi's mother is paralleled in the narration by a conjunction of oral and literary modes, of traditional and modern concepts, and of apparently contradictory ideals and aspirations.

Such a mixture of modes, concepts and ideals can be recognized in Tata's account of the arrival of the white man in southern Africa, an account which differs markedly from what 'Mistress' has taught Thandi. Tata assures him, however, that 'what you learn from me, Son, is just as true as what you learn from Mistress...when you're at school accept what Mistress teaches you so that you may pass and when you are at home listen to what Mama and I teach you' (p. 20). As was shown in Matshoba's reconstruction of the tale of Nonquase (described in the previous chapter), he is always careful to stress that myth is a strategy of history and,

therefore, he does not offer his stories as absolute truth. To answer one of Thandi's questions on the formation of the ANC, Tata goes back in history to the coming of the white man:

'One day out of the sea came a giant wooden fish to land and it spewed out strange men who were a sorry sight to behold...Their hair was like that of a goat, skins like flayed or scalded animals. ..."Maybe they broke the law of their people and were flayed" [thought the people]...

'...before the warriors could fall upon them a seer cried: "be these creatures as forlorn as they are, they are still humans...and their lives cannot be summarily despatched. Therefore methinks they must be taken to the King and their fate decided at the royal court."...That was the first and greatest mistake made by a representative of the ancestors among the people, my son.'...From the beginning of the story I had visualized the strange creatures as being of European extract, but never having seen or even imagined a miserable white person - they all smiled in the paper and magazines and were larger than life on the silver screen - I thought they could not possibly be subject to human frailty.

MD: 21-22.

Although consciously constructing ironic reversals of history, and choosing archaic terms to place the event far in the past, it is unlikely that Matshoba is aware of the full extent of the irony in his appropriation of courtly discourse and biblical imagery. The 'savages' not only show true 'Christian' compassion, but speak the language of the Bible and use the diction of gentility! The choice of these forms to which the writer has obviously been introduced in a mission school, probably rests, as I pointed out earlier, in a taste determined by an oral residue. (In the earlier discussion of the transition from orality to literacy it was shown that a culture which remains close to its oral background will show the residue of orality in its literary products. The indigenous languages of South Africa are highly metaphoric and formulaic and I think that the predilection for what Western readers may see as cliché and florid metaphor resides not only in the influence of a Victorian education but, to a large degree, in an unconscious attraction to these forms because they seem most accurately to effect the expression of the vernacular in print.)

Thandi wonders whether Shaka's power could have vanquished Tarzan, but decides: 'never, not when he [Shaka] was a Zumpi' (p. 79). However, he does come to realize that

we also had our own heroes who could fight or outwit the Europeans who are depicted as superior in all respects to the ama-Indy, the Red Indians, and the ama-Zumpi of the African jungle... We had Makana, the Left Hand... and Ndlambe... and Hlambamanzi... and Msimbithi...

MD: 137.

Through the interaction of Thandi and Tata, Matshoba thus illustrates what Stephen Slemon, in a general context, describes as reinterpreting of history 'as a concept enabling an expression of new "codes of recognition", within those acts of resistance, those unrealized intentions and those re-orderings of consciousness that history has rendered silent or invisible, to be recognized as shaping forces in a culture' (1988:159). Tata, the 'timer', emerges not as an old-fashioned patriarch, clinging to his roots, but as a forerunner of the men who now shape South African history.

The importance of orality in such reconstructions cannot be underestimated. Oral histories, maintains Kateryna Olijnyk Arthur,

are in oppositional relation to dominant histories and have always built into them an understanding that the past is not infinitely repeatable and recoverable 'as it was'. It is remade in every telling. There is no doubt that orality demands the recognition of the present in constructions of the past in a way that European written narratives with their teleological drive, do not. Crucial to this drive is the European collusion between historicism and realism with their common commitment to 'true' representation in linear narrative.

1990: 24-25.

In Chapter One I demonstrated the relationship between pre-literate folklore and stories such as those of Matshoba, with their episodic, non-linear character. Walter Ong, as well as many other researchers including Henry Louis Gates, Robert Nixon, Harold Scheub, Derek Wright, Solomon O. Iyasere, Craig Tapping, and Abiola Irele have investigated such relationships in African and Afro-American narratives. To Irele, 'orality functions as the matrix of an African mode of discourse':

The fact of a direct progression from oral literature is important here, since it is a question, not merely of drawing upon material from the oral tradition, but essentially of re-presenting such material through the medium of print, in order to give wider currency as well as new expression to forms that are already structured within the languages themselves. This practice does not preclude a modification of the traditional forms within the new modes; indeed, such a modification is inevitable, given the changed context of realization of the literature, which, with other contemporary forms that have developed from the oral tradition, are clearly marked by what we have remarked upon as the assimilation of modes and conventions of the Western literary culture. However, the predominance of orality as a shaping medium is a determining factor of the process by means of which such material is recreated and brought to a new mode of existence.

1990: 56-57.

Two examples of narrative form that have emerged from black storytelling are the blues (which will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter) and the trickster tale, whose formal elements can be recognized as being based on older African oral forms. Fanon points out that these forms should not be seen as having spontaneously grown from older forms of 'telling life' for they are the products of oppression and are suffused with 'aggression' against white domination (1967: 176). The blues is commonly autobiographical and typically self-assertive, lamenting the loss of human dignity under subjugation. The trickster tale uses an animal protagonist as the direct extension and representation of a varied, and in each retelling, consecutively changed life experience of the individual narrator, unlike the fixed forms that the European animal fable came to obtain. The 'trickster' is paradoxically both anti-conventional and culturally benevolent. A figure such as Bloke Modisane's beggar in 'The Dignity of Begging' (1951) embodies the *chakijane* motif found in traditional South African tales. A *chakijane* is literally a mongoose but in folklore is equivalent to Brer Rabbit. Modisane's story is about the tactics of survival, in which the *chakijane* excels. A modern example of the *chakijane* would be 'Wonderboy', in *Beyond the Minedumps*, who is 'champion of the staffriders'. Indeed, the youthful hero, following in his father's footsteps, defies authority in order to prove his independence, not just as an individual, but as a black person resisting exploitation.

The second chapter of the novel is headed 'Boyhood - Insubordination', and Thandi is

seen to change from the 'ideal boy child' of the first part of the story to a young rebel whose main desire is to be 'a clever of the township streets, city alleys, Faraday commuter train school, and not to be pushed around by anyone' (p. 158). The attraction of these roles for black writers can be seen as being based not only on their oppositional intent as a counter culture but also on their reflection of a common core in African oral folklore. They rely primarily on an oral mode of realization and are marked by both a convergence of themes and a common preoccupation with the modes of address of a new self-formulation. Mbulelo Mzamane points out that notions of committed literature and its function derive from the conventional role of the poet, or storyteller, as the embodiment of traditional values and the people's 'collective conscience' (1986: xxiv). The storyteller was expected to project the aspirations of the people even to the extent of incorporating criticism of the king into his/her praise poetry, thus pre-figuring later protest poetry. In Matshoba's story, Thandi's continual questioning of the normative practices of his time reflects a consciousness of this responsibility. In his search for a self-conscious 'existence' he queries all received information, from his teachers, from the media, even that from his father. While eavesdropping on the meetings held by his father's ANC cell he often aligns himself with Tat'u Smally who 'has always been a difficult one to convince on all the deliberations among the "timers"', and usually 'responds sceptically', until he is convinced by a sound argument (p. 169).

Although *Beyond the Minedumps* contains evidence of oral residue and a background of oral folklore, it was written a decade after *Call Me Not a Man*, and changes in the style and in the perceptions of the writer are apparent. Dialogue is less stilted and, accordingly, sounds more natural. The careful avoidance of colonial epithets has disappeared, and the words 'boy' and 'girl' appear quite naturally in the direct speech of characters. Characterization has been given individualizing rather than stereotypical traits. Black characters are portrayed 'warts and all' and, apart from certain exceptions where exaggerated expression has been used in the dialogue for a specific reason (as in Tata's speech), the dialogue suits the individual character. Even black policemen, who are usually selected by Matshoba for particularly vehement attack in their being represented as 'sellouts', are allowed to show their human emotions. On the train a policeman challenges Thandi:

'Where did you get an adult's weekly "ticket",  
mfana? Where d'you work?'

'I... I... my father g...gave it to me.' For the first time I regret the direction of my development. What are my parents going to think of me when I get arrested?

'He gives you his ticket to encourage you to go on jolly staff riding in the trains with this despicable lot?'

'N...No, baba. I...I'm merely going to the... the bioscope.'

He wags a fatherly finger at me and says, 'You choose better company to go to the bioscope with sonny. Otherwise these train rides'll lead you to reform school or number four if you don't get mangled under the train. Hear?'

MD: 132.

One could ask whether these changes indicate a move away from traditional forms towards Western literary ideals? This would not, however, necessarily be a valid deduction. Franz Fanon points out that a literary culture emerging from colonisation will move through a number of identifiable stages. In the first phase of colonial culture, he argues, all criteria for legitimacy are based on the standards, both overt and covert, of the metropolitan culture. The educated African adopts the habits of the master, even though the 'hybrid' product of that adoption in its very hybridism radically 'interrogates' the universalist pretensions of the metropole sign. In the second phase of the dialectic, the nationalist culture protests against its subordination by celebrating its own distinct identity; therefore, theories of indigenous aesthetics, even personality, are formulated and announced. While this vocal self-promotion restores a sense of pride, it nevertheless reinforces the colonial lie itself, which is that colonial culture is 'other', incapable of being one of the 'us' of the metropolis. In the third, more liberated phase, the ex-colony 'appropriates' or annexes those parts of its former master's culture it finds useful, having less need of the rhetoric of nationalism, and being more immediately concerned with the material welfare of its citizens (Griffiths and Moody, 1989: 84).

Such progression does not indicate a teleological desire to equal white discursive empowerment; rather, it is a manifestation of cultural responses arising out of changing social conditions and attitudes, and it reveals the profound correspondence between experience and imagination. The change in Matshoba's writing over a decade reflects a similar movement. Although English clichés still appear and are used as formulaic expressions ('I ran for my dear life...I wanted to save my dear life...') English translations of Xhosa expressions are far more common: 'I'll beat you for a doctor and his servants', says Thandi's mother whenever she

discovers the children are up to mischief; 'I am going to dance with you', yells the school principal, brandishing his cane at the school children. Another tactic is the appropriation of English clichés which lend a semantic richness that is lacking (I think) in Matshoba's earlier work, where one gets the impression that the clichés are consciously adopted from teachers, or unconsciously used when trying to effect the vernacular in print. In *Beyond the Mines* the cliché seems woven into the dialogue deliberately to create a comic effect. After stealing peaches Thandi suffers excruciating stomach pains which make it impossible for him to hide his sin from his mother:

'I'm dying, Mama.'  
 'So that's what it is! You're right, my dear son,  
 the wages of sin is death, and punishment.  
 Nombuyiselo, go get me a strong switch from the  
 apple tree.'...  
 Smack! 'I...' smack! '...have...' smack! 'been  
 telling you...that...thou shalt, not, steal. You  
 break...my law...and you break...the law...of God!'  
 I heard her between my screams.

MD: 24.

'Ghetto English' is also prominent: 'Moegoe' (a bumpkin); 'ma-liner' (a pickpocket); 'ma-cardboard' (a policeman); 'sixtyfive' (a knife), and so on, expressions that, like the Harlem 'nigger-talk' of the American negro, and the Rastafarian slang of Jamaica, arose spontaneously in the language of South African city blacks.

Life in the Western Townships in the 1950s is vividly evoked. The reader experiences the excitement of Christmas, communal celebrations, and trips to the movies with the child narrator. These happy scenes are interspersed with glimpses of appalling social conditions which are revealed only in dramatised events or the reported dialogue of adults. The Township emerges as a vibrant, exciting place which provides all the adventure a little boy could desire. Njabulo Ndebele's accusation that black writers concentrate on 'spectacle' can be seen to be challenged in the unfolding of episode after episode of 'ordinary' life: small family crises; early sexual experiences; adventures of teenage gangs. The adult narrator explains that he is telling us:

all these experiences which may seem insignificant  
 in any person's life, in order that you may  
 appreciate the fact that every human being should

be perceived in terms of the totality of his little experiences, for, without being able to articulate it, I feel that all the hardly noticeable changes I have so far undergone have been the resultants of what I have seen, heard, smelled, tasted and felt, inside and outside.

MD: 182.

He stresses the importance of both 'experience' and 'information' in the construction of identity, which is 'perceived in terms of the totality of little experiences'. White domination is obviously the force which prompts the search for identity and for the recuperation of African history. Yet whites seldom figure in the described events, and when they do it is not as stereotyped 'oppressors' but, paradoxically, as childhood heroes. In one such episode, the boys give the names of movie heroes to the drivers of earth-moving machines who are clearing a plot of land for the building of the present Mzimhlope station. This reflects the influence of American popular culture on young Africans:

They dug the thirty metre wilderness between our houses and the single railtrack with monstrous earthmovers driven by white men whom we picked for ourselves. Mine looked like Tarzan and outdrove all the rest.

MD: 79.

Roy Rogers, Wonderboy (the champion of the staffriders who 'has his own legends'), Gene Autry, Jack Randall, and Goliath are adopted as heroes. Franz Fanon describes a similar phenomenon:

The black schoolboy in the Antilles ... identifies himself with the white man who carries truth to savages. He invests the hero, who is white, with all his own aggression... Little by little, one can observe in the young Antillean the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white. When in school he has to read stories of savages told by white men, he always thinks of Senagalese.

1952: 148.

Thandi identifies with Goliath in Goliath and the Barbarians and with the cowboys rather than with the Indians in the cowboy movies. Fanon describes the conflict created by this identification when the black boy realizes that in the white world, it is he who is perceived to



be the 'savage':

As I begin to realize that the Negro is the spirit of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I then try to find value for what is bad - since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation,...I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged around me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal.

1967: 197.

In an echo of Fanon's experience Thandi regrets

the idolization of movie-stars, for they had been my heroes from the first one I saw at Mahala. Unfortunately for Tata and for me, for that matter, as I would like to view everything as Tata does, all the heroes have been white and their qualities and deeds so superhuman that you should never have seen them not to adore them.

MD: 137.

Earlier in the story Thandi had remarked that he 'perhaps could have learned to deify an [African hero] but for the fact that all of them had been defeated in their valour throughout the generations, a factor which somehow fortified rather than dispelled the Tarzan complex' (p. 24). Thandi's introduction to modern myths is affected equally by his lack of exposure at school to information on significant local events and by his over-exposure to Anglo-American popular culture. After Nelson Mandela is arrested, he and his school friends are indifferent to the news, being more interested in 'Jeanette's creamy thighs'. They have to be informed of the importance of this event. Once again we see Matshoba's conscious irony in portraying the child narrator (who represents himself) as the conditioned product of a 'depoliticized', Europeanized education while having Tata present the 'enlightened' views that Matshoba now holds. Even having heard from Tata that the arrest of Mandela signals the end of peaceful protest and heralds a 'new era' of war, the young boy has difficulty in conceiving of a war in which the black man could be the aggressor, let alone a hero:

Throughout the prayer my mind recalls all the war movies I have seen as I try to decide which of the heroes among Audie Murphy, of 'To Hell and Back', Jeffrey Hunter, of 'From Here to Eternity', Jack Palance, of 'Attack', others of 'The Thin Red Line' and 'The Green Berets', I am going to emulate in the impending war. So excited am I by the prospect that I visualize myself mowing down all the Germans singlehandedly and emerging as the first African war hero, for all victorious wars are fought against Germans. I have always regretted the fact that the only Africans I know of who might have become heroes went down at sea with the Mendi, before they could even fire a single shot.

MD: 167.

In spite of wide geographical division, a common psychological reaction to similar experiences is evident in different black people of African descent, because they have all suffered oppression that has been based on their 'blackness'. For this reason, as I suggested earlier, it may be useful to consider the similarities, while not forgetting the particularities, between the narratives which have been produced as a result of comparable experiences, in order to see if there is justification for claims to an 'African imagination' and an 'indelible' blackness.

Some important theoretical works in the field of black literary studies published in the last decade investigate the principles structuring Afro-American narratology from its earliest examples whose roots lay in seventeenth-century Africa. Henry Louis Gates shows how the old pre-blues scheme of question and answer pattern is used in texts, rather in the manner that a gospel choir interacts with a church audience and minister, to examine 'reality' and to question older texts. Gates suggests that 'black oral "literary" forms can merge with received (European) forms to create new (and distinctively black) genres of literature' (1984: 42). Abiola Irele explores the notion of an 'African imagination' based on a 'framework of reference...a corpus of texts and works by Africans, situated in relation to a global experience that embraces both the pre-colonial and the modern frame of reference'. He feels that the term 'African literature' is restrictive:

The point is that, for historical reasons which include important developments in the New World, Africa has emerged as an operative concept, applied to an area of experience and of existence. It is essential to bear in mind that this notion,

starting as an ideological construction, has developed beyond this contingent factor to assume the significance of objective fact...Because of the developments in the New World and their consequences for our notion of Africa, the term African literature...excludes a dimension of the experience which brought it into being in the first place.

1990: 52-53.

It would seem that Irele considers the influence of Afro-American writing on African writing to be just as significant as the African influences on American black writing. Scholars of Afro-American literature distinguish three types of narrative, all of which emerged in the early nineteenth century: the slave, the criminal, and the spiritual narrative. Slave narratives are seen to have had the greatest influence in shaping black literature even up to the present time; but Houston Baker shows how spiritual narrative is based on slave narrative, in spite of the oft-repeated claim of these tales to be the story of a 'Christian convert who finds solace from the ministrings of a kind Providence'. In his discussion of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustav Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789) Baker points out that the story reveals itself to be closer to a 'trader's secular diary', in which a canny slave masters the rudiments of the economics that condition his very life (1984: 32-33). Baker's aim is to show that the two guiding structural principles of black narratology since the seventeenth century in Africa have been 'economic deportation' and 'the economics of slavery'. He demonstrates how the writer, Gustav Vassa, portrays himself as a civilised Christian subject, who is able to survive the vagaries of servitude and the cruelty of fate because of his conviction of a personal salvation in the vision of a crucified Christ, but, in fact, transcends his status as transportable property by engaging in his own clever trading ventures, through which he eventually gains his manumission. Vassa realizes that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status as property (1989:35). Baker demonstrates that certain recurrent, discursive patterns suggest a unified economic grounding for Afro-American narratives. Examining the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) he shows, once again, the dual voice of the slave. One autobiographical voice follows a developmental history that leads from Christian enlightenment, while a contrasting self follows a course dictated by the economics of slavery. Douglass, like Vassa, earns enough money to buy his freedom, in his case by selling copies of his book: in effect by publicly selling his voice in order to secure private

ownership of his 'voice-person' (1989: 50).

Robert Von Rimscha (1990) also compares African with Afro-American literature and notes striking structural similarities between them, in spite of the different cultural contexts from which they emerge. He sees, however, a disturbing tendency in American criticism to form what he calls a 'black canon' in which only works which seem to lend themselves to comparison with the 'white canon' are represented. Ralph Ellison's *Sonny Blues* is, accordingly, considered to be worthy of scholarly treatment when compared to *The Great Gatsby* or to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* rather than when looked at in opposition to, and as a continuation of, Richard Wright's work. As Colin MacCabe has noted, 'the critique of meaning and interpretation [under these circumstances] becomes a powerful method for re-reading, and thus preserving, the canon' (1987: 7). Von Rimscha shows that black writers who search for other contents and other ways of expression - writers such as Nora Zeale Hurston who 'show the distinctiveness of a separate literary history' - remain marginalized in American academic criticism (1990: 23). In South Africa a similar pattern can be observed. Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe are generally prescribed for university study by virtue of being considered representative of 'black writing', in preference to Es'kia Mphahlele, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Can Themba, Ellen Kuzwayo, or Miriam Tlali - writers who, like Hurston, show the 'distinctiveness of a separate literary history' and, although popular with black readers, are marginalized by mainstream literary criticism. I do not mean to impute that the work of Soyinka and Achebe is not 'indelibly black', but am suggesting that their writing is chosen for its assimilability into the Anglo-American canon rather than for its typicality as 'black literature'. The reason for this is that it conforms in many ways, such as in showing 'cohesion' and 'linear progression', with the standards demanded by this canon. Although *Beyond the Minedumps* cannot be regarded as typical of a 'slave narrative' there are notable similarities between Matshoba's text and the typical slave narratives of the Afro-Americans who experienced conditions of oppression comparable to those of the indigenous people of South Africa. It has been demonstrated that the main compulsion behind black autobiography is the need to proclaim an 'existent self', when identity has been negated under conditions of oppression. The 'self' created in slave narratives is one formed in topoi: 'I was born' is one of the most famous introductions to slave narratives. (Poor Topsy, of course, 'jes grew' and could therefore claim no identity.)

Thandi, Matshoba's narrator, starts his story: 'My birth certificate dates my arrival on

earth way back to the twenty first of May in the year of Our Lord, nineteen hundred and fifty'. (This is in fact Matshoba's birth date.) The author is thus introduced as believable, trustworthy, and, most importantly, existent. This establishes the central claim of black autobiography. Another topos is that the narrator is ignorant of his parentage and his birthplace, a fact that is used to characterize both the inhuman conditions people are subjected to under slavery and the author's potential to transcend them. In the 'Autobiographical Note' to *Call Me Not a Man* Matshoba tells us that he can:

faintly remember my father and mother paying me  
visits at weekends and my being unsure that they  
were really my parents, only believing what I was  
told.

1979: vii.

Thandi, the narrator of *Beyond the Minedumps*, is not ignorant of his parentage, but says that his

first few years were of a nomadic nature for we had  
no home of our own and my mother had to knock from  
one relative to another's door, where we would stay  
for a while before moving on. She, a nurse, stayed  
at the Baragwanath nurses home so that I hardly  
ever saw her, except when she was off-duty and came  
to visit, sometimes leaving on the same day...

MD: 1.

Early experiences of black/white confrontation introduce another topos, as a personal confrontation convinces the protagonist of his 'otherness'. Thandi's first real encounter with a white occurs at the 'Mero' cinema. He and his friends have watched movies at the 'Broadway', the 'Goodhope', and the 'Rio', but when they seek entrance to the 'Mero', the manager 'vomited profanities which concluded with something like "donderse kaffir! vuilgoed!" and chased away the gang who were 'never to forget that African children are not welcomed where European children amuse themselves' (p. 136). The rejection of Christianity, which was illustrated earlier, is also typical of the slave story, as are the recurrent references to the train as a symbol of 'the heartbeat of the people'. These various topoi, taken together, suggest the negated identity of the subjugated person, who is thus compelled to resist this negation and reconstruct a 'presence'.

The significance of the 'train' became apparent in the earlier discussion of the short-story cycle, and references to trains recur throughout. Beyond the Minedumps, for example in 'Mama's' question about 'riding staff', and in the policeman's assumption that riding in trains will lead to Thandi's downfall, one way or another. Both Von Rimscha and Baker demonstrate how the train has become an arch-object of blues which echoes its rhythms while voicing the loneliness of those who are deported from homes and loved ones, only to be exploited as labour units. Matshoba shows not only the centrality of the train in the lives of black South Africans, but demonstrates his awareness of the 'economics of deportation':

In the location people live beyond the minedumps  
where they are dumped with train and bus loads of  
hundreds and thousands each evening after  
exhausting their labour in the service of *abelungu*.  
MD: 37.

A wonderful portrayal of the township's eating house reveals the social distinctions found in any society. In this case 'apartheid' language, as reflected in South African Railways terminology, reflects these distinctions. Matshoba's combination of Soweto slang with graphic details perfectly evokes the ambience of the 'restaurant':

The twenty square metres 'Penny Soup' doubles as a restaurant, a 'tstysa nyama', which means 'burn the meat', because one can buy raw meat to roast on a coal stove in the backyard - a dancing club with a blinking jukebox, as well as an all intoxicating concoction - a shebeen. To keep the different 'classes' of clientele apart the interior is divided into 'Fes klas' with cheap kitchen-scheme tables and chairs where the more refined whiteman's liquor drinkers sit, 'Sekenklas', with wooden benches and steel tables for the middle class packaged sorghum beer drinkers, mostly 'clevers' as opposed to the 'Fes klas,' Jongbok (young goat) dandies, and 'Thet klas', for the dregs of the city alleys and storm drains who are easily distinguishable by their self-neglect and the skokiaan or mbamba, a brown bread, brown sugar and yeast fermentation that they drink out of jam or condensed-milk tins, and which blows and disfigures their faces and turns their hair into feather-like fur through which one can see the parallel comb marks, if one of them happens to remember the hygienic use of water.

MD: 139.

When Thandi accompanies his mother to Johannesburg, he notices 'the stone-faced whites' in the 'Fesklas' carriage, whom he contrasts with the 'blacks greeting and talking cheerfully', singing as they travel (p. 30). As I pointed out in the discussion on 'A Glimpse of Slavery', one of the notable differences between slave narrative and black South African writing is the emphasis placed on optimism in South African works. In spite of conditions of degradation, the subjugated people always sing and dance, smile and joke with each other, whereas pessimism seems dominant in Afro-American tales. The only escape from their abject condition is for the slaves in American writing to work their way into the white man's world. There is no indication that they may have a world of their own. (This is no doubt partly due to the high ratio of whites in the American population.)

An especially interesting aspect of the debates on 'the economics of slavery', now that the repeal of the Land and Group Areas Acts is imminent, is the attention paid by the young Thandi to the conversation among his father's friends who gather at Tata's house for secret meetings of their ANC cell. Tat'u Smally is explaining why 'the Princy' is quite wrong in describing the white man as 'a bane foisted upon us by the ancestors for some ancient sin' because 'the blame lies squarely on our shoulders not because of some kush who laughed at his father's balls...' but because

'Our only sin was against ourselves by allowing them to dispossess us of the land and thus its resources, so that we were left with little or no wealth at all to bargain with. What we should be really striving for, like Chief Luthuli and the S.A. Congress of Trade Unions maintain by saying the workers are the spear of the Nation, is the restoration of the "fair distribution of wealth", for as long as the European settlers monopolize the wealth of this country and the power that goes with it, we, the have-nots, are compelled to submit to little-reward service for their benefit, or simply slavery like the people's on the farms.'

I made it a point to find out what he had really meant by 'striving' for a 'fair distribution of wealth.'

MD: 149.

Once again Thandi's eavesdropping allows him a 'peep into the adult world', and provides him with another piece of information which not only helps to explain his deprived condition, but

which will enable him to reconstruct his lost identity.

Another theme common to black writing is an emphasis on the value of communal sharing. In *Beyond the Minedumps* a group of elders, who are present at the celebration feast for the birth of Thandi's baby brother, praise the magnificence of the feast, seeing in it a demonstration that *ubuntu* has survived in Tata's heart 'despite the wretchedness of this life which has tempted many an African to pursue only individual interests' (p. 19, my emphasis). Thandi's schoolteacher, 'T', explains the historical significance of *ubuntu*, showing why it should be an ingrained principle in all descendants of ancient Africa:

'Long ago, before abelungu were ever known to exist in these parts...your great great grandfathers and I used to travel from here to visit the Pharoah in Egypt, carrying only *amabhechu ethu* (our skin pelvic girdle), shields, knobsticks and spears to defend themselves, not against people, but against the beasts of the wilderness because we knew without being taught that we would be welcomed among all the people through whose settlements we passed, generously offered food and shelter to rest for as long as we wished...learning and participating in their customs...we would be supplied with all the provisions we would need to reach our next destination as well as an escort to see us safely on our way, carrying messages and gifts for the people ahead. Now that was *Ubuntu*, a virtue that was promulgated by the ancestors on the basis of mutual generosity.'

MD: 162.

This idyll is a perfect example of the mixture of oral and literary modes found in this autobiographical novel. 'T' plays the role of *griot*, linking past and present by placing himself in the story among the ancestors. He slips unconsciously from the first person construction, 'us', to the third person 'themselves', and then back to the first person. This in no way detracts from the immediacy of his story, because his emphasis is on the *mutuality* of African experience. It was noted in the previous chapter that Matshoba often distorts historical details for his own ends. In 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', for instance, he says of Makana that he 'led one of the early nationalist movements against colonialism...at once soldier and prophet..It is supposed that he died by drowning trying to escape from his prison on Robben Island' (1979: 135). Here he has conflated the lives of Makana and Nxele to portray a great African hero; hence



Thandi's belief that, as he can swim, he may be able to conquer the whole German army and become the first African hero. Matshoba, however, averts criticism of his historical inaccuracies by repeatedly pointing out the relative truth of different versions of an historical event in relation to a specific didactic intention. Although he frequently introduces the concept of ubuntu into his stories to show the contrast between African communalism and European individualism, Matshoba often selfconsciously reveals the conflict in himself between his traditional African humanism and his more militant inclinations against the white government. Similar conflicts are identified as part of the growth of the protagonist in slave narratives. An example of this particular tension can be seen in the description of the feast for the birth of the baby. One of Tata's friends urges him to make more babies so that everyone can more often enjoy his ubuntu:

Tata laughed but disagreed about the motive for having children. 'Naw, *mfowethu*, we must make more soldiers. You see how things are these days. Sooner or later we'll be needing warriors to challenge Verwoerd and Strydom because peaceful protest and passive resistance against their laws doesn't work with them.'

MD: 19.

Another obvious conflict revealed by Matshoba, in this case unconsciously, is between a sympathy for feminist causes and a subscription to traditional African male chauvinism. Matshoba is able to sympathize with the oppression and subjugation of females in his own and other societies. His female characters are portrayed as strong and intelligent, even when they are very young in years. Sis Nombuyiselo, 'an overgrown, not so pretty, dark, dark Amazon, whose kindness was the direct opposite of her looks' (p. 21), is responsible for meting out discipline in the family, for caring for the baby and the youngsters, and for taking Thandi to school on his first day. She is reliable enough to relay messages from teachers to parents, and be left alone at home to care for the children. She is later revealed to be only 'about thirteen or fourteen years of age' (p. 25). (One is reminded of the narratives written by young female slaves such as Harriet Wilson [*Our Nig*, 1859], Harriet Brent Jacob [*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Mrs Harriet Brent Jacob, Written by Herself*, 1861], and in contemporary literature, the stories of Alice Walker [*The Color Purple*, 1982, and others].) The narrator's mother in *Beyond the Minedumps* rules the family with an iron hand and is portrayed as a person of the highest moral integrity and strength of will, overshadowing her husband, who, in his son's eyes, is a

'timer' (old man) of whom he claims, ' he has said little in the story' because

until [the baby was brought home] I had seen much less of him to identify and bond with him. To me, although the pocket money and goodies he brought me were appreciated, he was simply a man who interfered by taking my mother away to God knows where, during the few times we could be together.

MD: 12.

Matshoba's own mother is easily recognisable in the character of Thandi's mother. She is, at the time of writing, seventy-three years old and walks with great difficulty, but still dominates the family and is active in community life and social services. Physically attractive females are described, however, either condescendingly or in terms of their sexuality. For instance, Helen is alternately an object of desire, and 'below average intelligence when it comes to the facts of life, as [Thandi] thinks all girls are, what with being pampered and cocooned against reality' (p. 80). On being challenged, in conversation, on the point of a chauvinist/feminist contradiction in his work, Matshoba chuckled and admitted that it was indeed a conflict in his life which often caused considerable confusion, and remains unresolved. The various conflicts described so far can be seen as part of 'the growth process' of the author, represented by the protagonist. Thandi progresses through the course of a formal education, but the system of this education has been devised in order to deny him full 'existence'. His own enquiring mind, assisted by his father's informal and unconventional education, provides him with ideas which cause conflict and result in his questioning all received ideas, even those of his father. When Tata insists that his version of history is 'the truth', Thandi challenges him: 'Were you there?' (p. 78). By the time he goes to high school he has a sense of personal worth and takes pride in relying on his own sense of judgement. The present story goes no further than Thandi's entrance to high school, but, as a privileged 'listener' to some of the rest of the story, I can reveal that Thandi later leaves the University of Fort Hare because he refuses to conform to a syllabus aimed at turning him into a 'one-dimensional man'.

The purpose in searching out the similarities between American slave narratives and a story written over a century later on the other side of the world is to seek grounds for Irele's claim for an 'African imagination' and for Gates's notion of a 'black formal critical matrix'. If such a matrix is indeed distinguishable, and I hope to have shown that it is, it will then be

possible to describe a distinct literary context within which black South African writers and black American writers can be seen to share common features. Analysis of their different responses to a common historical background of African tradition and social oppression should yield more significance than the method of study whereby works by black authors are examined in relation to the Euro-American tradition. The context of 'African experience' would take into account the total framework of imaginative expression which is represented in black writing, whether as immediate reference to Africa or in forms that have arisen from the cultural and ethnic resources of Africa. It would also provide a frame of reference for understanding the numerous formal and cultural influences that both Afro-American writing and social experience have had on South African writers. In some instances, American influence shows in style and vocabulary, notably in the work of Oswald Mtshali and Can Themba. Matshoba, for his part, uses terms such as: 'us darkies', 'Shantytown', 'chaingang', 'Uncle Tom', 'ghetto', and refers to black American civil rights leaders in the course of his stories. He says he was greatly moved on reading slave narratives, a feeling that is shared by Mphahlele. Describing his response to Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* Mphahlele says:

I smelled our own poverty in his Southern setting.  
The long searing black song of Wright's people  
sounded like ours.

1984: 79.

It would take another study to investigate all the cross references to a common historical background in the works of the various black writers. Even this brief look at Matshoba's work seems, however, to provide justification for us to consider a distinct literary tradition which is 'indelibly black'. As Gates has suggested:

By learning to read a black text within a black  
formal cultural matrix, and explaining it with  
principles of criticism at work in both the  
Euro-American and Afro-American traditions, I  
believe that we critics can produce richer  
structures of meaning than are otherwise possible.

1987: 33.

Can we as critics, however, be content only with 'finding richer structures of meaning'? Is even the most well-intentioned white commentary not vulnerable to attack by the irony of its very position: as a comment on another's discourse? Are black writers who depend on a

humanist notion of subjectivity, for example, not merely replacing one ideology with another? Kateryna Olijnyk Arthur posits a dialogic historicist approach to resolve this impasse by allowing post-modernism to play the transformational role to which it aspires. She sees post-colonial writing as being in a strong position to 'twist the thread of colonial super-narrative' (1990: 24). She refers to a paper by Howard Felperin in which he points out that as post-colonial indigenous writing springs from an oral cultural tradition, it inscribes both past and present in its meaning which, in his opinion, is a prerequisite for any 'genuinely historical discourse' (Arthur, 1990: 32). What she is saying is that the study of past cultures must have present import and consequence if it is to extend beyond antiquarian, archeological, or anthropological interest. Accordingly, Arthur identifies a 'destabilizing' characteristic in post-colonial indigenous writing

by the fact that it is not fixed and stable and  
also by its perpetual and multiple dissembling.  
By adopting borrowed forms, voices and postures,  
it carnivalizes, in the act of writing, all  
official historymaking. It is therefore, by  
definition, double-voiced since it must partake  
of the colonizing discourses in the process of  
decolonization.

1990: 24.

Alternative new histories have to speak a language which can attack the metropolitan subject from within the language of power: that closed discourse which has silenced the 'other' in the past. Oral traditions are at an advantage in that memory is their mode and so memory/history is recognized as a changing two-way negotiation between past and present (1990: 32). For this reason, works such as Matshoba's *Beyond the Minedumps*, which offer us the suppressed history of a nation through the eyes of a black individual, may, in a context of 'black narratology', provide us not only with 'richer structures of meaning', but also with challenges to dominant critical perspectives in the institutions of learning. My hope is that Matshoba will soon have this autobiographical novel published and, furthermore, that universities can be persuaded to include it in their syllabuses.

### Notes

1. All quotations from *Beyond the Minedumps* are taken from the unedited, handwritten manuscript.
2. An extract from the original manuscript is included in Appendix 1, so as to enable the reader to experience Matshoba's style of writing.
3. Matshoba frequently makes subtle reference to the convenient misuse of the concept of ubuntu or communal sharing, rather in the manner of the recent jokes about 'redistribution of wealth'.

### Chapter Three

<u>Drama:</u>	Seeds of War
<u>Filmscript:</u>	Menacing Shadow
<u>Video-Film:</u>	The Mohale Str. Brothers: two brothers, two murders

In Chapter Two it became clear that a common factor in much black writing is self-assertion. This demands the recognition of differences in tradition, culture and expression, and requires that we do not use Western expectations of psychological inner states as our norm. The search for a valorized representation has, therefore, led to the launching of various attacks by contemporary literary criticism on the view that 'English' refers to the study of an accepted canon of work in a clearly defined national language: a canon which privileges its own preferred notions of cultural and moral excellence, of 'literature, and of an educated audience.

The feminist critique of the canon challenges its assumption of male dominations while the class critique stresses the extent to which the accepted literary definitions of culture ignore popular cultural forms.

But perhaps, suggests Colin MacCabe,

the final and most disabling attack on the canon comes not from the standpoint of gender or class but from that of race. If the finest flowers of English literature are to be found in Othello, Robinson Crusoe, and The Nigger of the 'Narcissus', it is hardly surprising if young blacks in Africa, the Caribbean, the U.S.A., and Britain have wished to question the canon. In some ways it is this investigation that cuts deepest of all.

The circumstances of history mean that, outside the relatively recent past, there is no alternative black writing to celebrate. There is no Aphra Behn, Mary Wollstonecraft, no William Cobbett or Gerard Winstanley to appeal to. What there is, however, is a very strong oral tradition, most powerful in its musical forms. Any black critique of the canon is thus inevitably aimed at the very equation of culture and the written word.

1987: 6.

The language of crisis, which is central to new struggles, seems to produce a completely new idea of political time and demands urgent and dramatic effects. Yet there is a difficult relation

between the idea of crisis as a new beginning and the activities of an institution which is capable of assimilating even those thrusts aimed against it. For this reason the adoption of a 'black canon' which is found interesting only because of its usefulness in drawing comparisons with Western works, is merely an 'inoculation', or the 'disease as the cure' (Barthes, 1973: 150). An alternative grouping of black works based on features seen to be common to black writing throughout the world, by contrast, could provide a basis for a deeper understanding of these works. Such a grouping would not be dictated simply by the racial difference of the authors, but would result from a common experience of subjugation, and is expressed through forms and modes influenced by African oral traditions and contemporary practices..

In the preceding chapter I attempted to show how such an approach could help to effect the transformation of dominating expectations in literary expression. In order to realize this aim, however, cultural products would obviously need to reach a reasonably large proportion of the group who share the common experience and, even more importantly, to be understood by those who maintain the status quo because of their prejudice against change. In response to a discussion concerning the very slight biological differences that determine 'race', Houston Baker cynically but accurately observed: 'The shift to the common ground of subtle academic discourse is ultimately unhelpful in a world where New York taxi-drivers scarcely ever think of mitochondria before refusing to pick me up' (1986: 186). In the same vein, but with reference to the academy, Henry Louis Gates sounds a note of pessimism: 'Todorov can't even hear us, Houston, when we talk his academic talk, how's he gonna hear if we talk that talk, the talk of the black idiom?'. He declares, however, that he is not going to give up, because he is 'still optimistic'. After all, 'things is just gettin' innerestin', he says, quoting le Roi Jones (1986: 210). But 'why does it still matter so much to be heard by the tone-deaf masters of European theory when other and larger audiences want to listen?' asks Elaine Showalter (1989: 238); and Diana Brydon, too, points out that there are others to talk to besides Todorov. By allowing the discussion to remain within the terms established by the dominant discourse, Gates's goal of seeking 'to understand the ideological subtext which any critical theory reflects and embodies, and the relation which this subtext bears to the production of meaning', is subverted (Brydon, 1989: 2).

'The challenge for the critic', maintains Brydon, 'is to find an alternative power base to that which has traditionally fuelled imperialist academic endeavour. That base lies in

recognizing the potential power of comparative post-colonial studies to pose an alternative to Traditional English studies' (1989: 3). We should be looking more closely, therefore, at the ways in which post-colonial writers have re-written the discursive conflict between the metropolis and its margins. Looked at from the perspectives of the margins, 'the stable antithesis between the metropolitan centre and its margin becomes eroded and the margin shifts to the centre' (Eagleton, 1987: 6). To assert centrality in this way is not to revert to Nationalism but to acknowledge that each country, each literature, each text, is central to its own perspective.

To speak to the majority of the South African public is, as I have suggested, essential to the process of transforming both white society and the academy. In order to be heard, black artists need not a double voice, but a triple voice. They need to evoke recognition in those audiences who share their views, at the same time as convincing the Barend Strydoms and the 'taxi-drivers' of a human commonality in spite of differences. A third task is to avoid being accepted by the academy either as a 'Caffre at Hyde-Park-Corner'<sup>1</sup> or as part of a struggle that is only a desire in the imagination of the left intelligentsia. Equality within the institutions of learning will only be possible when critics acknowledge that works which are different require critical perspectives which are appropriate to the works themselves. If cultural products are recognized as those which are liked by *most* people rather than by *other* people, a change in artistic evaluation will become imperative. Although Anthony Appiah maintains that 'what happens will happen not because we pronounce on the matter in theory, but will happen out of the changing everyday practices of African cultural life' (1991: 386), there is no reason to conclude that critics cannot play a part in changing those practices by acting as mediating agencies in helping to popularize cultural works. Keeping this aim in mind, this chapter will deal with Matshoba's drama, screenplay, and video productions while considering Colin MacCabe's contention that 'cultural studies is the democratic successor to "English"':

Tied neither to the written medium (a practical weakness of much theory) nor to an evaluative practice, cultural studies holds out the promise of an analysis of texts and their situation which would replace canonical study with a genuine cultural materialism.

1987: 7.

The justification for the study of cultural forms such as television, according to MacCabe,



should not rely only on criteria of relevance or necessity ('because half the population cannot read'), but should be aimed at identifying and defining 'positive values'. Cultural significance, he maintains, rests to a large extent on the possibility that cultural forms provide resistance to dominant ideological forms (1987: vii). Juri Lotman also sees such cultural considerations as central to aesthetic appreciation. He views the 'literary' text as a 'secondary modelling system' based on a natural linguistic plane, which is able to present a model of 'reality' in such a way that at certain times the narrow aesthetic function of 'literature' is pushed into the background and, for instance, a political or religious function must be presented for the text to be perceived aesthetically (1977).

In trying to appeal to a wide audience, black writers in Africa face enormous ideological and practical problems. They generally write in English, an approach which Gates suggests is inherently ironic:

We are justified, however, in wondering aloud if the sort of subjectivity which these writers seek through the act of writing can be realized through a process which is so very ironic from the outset: how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence? Can writing, with the many differences it makes and marks, mask the blackness of the black face that addresses the text of Western letters, in a voice that speaks English through an idiom which contains the irreducible element of cultural difference that will always separate the white voice from the black voice?  
1985: 12.

Even if other black writers were to follow the example of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and write in the vernacular, the high rate of illiteracy and the diversity of languages spoken in any one African country would make the venture not only unaffordable, but impracticable in terms of reaching the audience it seeks. Perhaps what Gates calls 'a return to the vernacular' would indeed resolve the ideological conflict, for by 'vernacular' he does not mean an indigenous African language but the use of 'that talk, the talk of the black idiom'. Every colonised black community has developed a patois, and in most cases these dialects are mutually understandable. With a little effort they can also be understood by speakers of standard English. In South Africa we have the 'gamat taal' of the Cape 'coloured' and the 'tsotsi-taal' of the urban black. It has been claimed that such

'languages' are essentially spoken languages and are only ever written for performance, as they are too simple for learned discourse or philosophical thought. In refuting such a view, Caroline Cooper quotes Honor Ford Smith's introduction to *Lionheart Gal*:

Patwah is written for performance, which is excellent, but what is not excellent is that it is not written for silent reflection or for purposes 'other than entertainment. Yet we all know that Jamaican people reflect all the time in their heads or in conversations in Patwah, and we also know that reflection is part of the process of gaining control over one's own life. So, why are certain kinds of written language still dominated totally by English?

1989: 52.

Cooper goes on to demonstrate the use of 'Patwah' in an analysis of *Lionheart Gal* which she writes exclusively in patois. Her aim is to show that if critics were to employ the discourse of the works they willingly discuss, they too would become a necessary part of the subversive activity they purport to be promoting.

In this chapter I am going to argue that film might be the most effective form through which writers can reach a wide public and, at the same time, act as a subversive force against ruling monopolies. I will also suggest that what may appear to be 'faulty English' may be seen to mirror the dynamics of the social context in which it has evolved, and must therefore be seen as a necessary part of both the struggle against domination and the more widespread dissemination of popular cultural products, the latter of which is essential to the success of such a struggle.

John Wideman, an American academic, describes the evolution of 'that talk' and its deconstructive effect:

This process of symbolic abstraction, of creating verbal icons, is basic to black versions of English. Africans took English sounds and with variations in tempo, rhythm, tone and timbre, transformed them. Pushing English in the direction of their more tonal African languages, new sense evolved as well as new sounds. Play reinforced a tendency to draw out the music buried within English - rhyme, interpolation of African syllables and words or just plain scat-singing nonsense marked this African stylization of the

speech of their captors. The testimony of contemporary Africans who speak Wes Cos or Kriol or pidgin, West Indian fancy talk, the oral narratives of ex-slaves, contemporary narratives collected from prisons, bars, street corners and the working place, as well as rap records and the folk-derived forms of Afro-American music, all testify to the fact that black speech is not simply faulty English but a witness to a much deeper fault, a crack running below the surface, a fatal flaw in the forms and pretensions of so-called civilised language.

1989: 47.

Considering the predominantly oral nature of such discourse it seems obvious that a visual medium is able to provide the most suitable means for allowing the 'text' to achieve greatest effect. In an interview with Nigerian critic Egejuru, Ngugi has said that he sees film as the 'most direct art form that can reach the people at grass roots level' (1980: 108) provided the difficulties of production can be overcome, while Terry Eagleton, envisaging 'the end of English', points to the decline in literacy in the postmodern world. While he does not espouse the myth of the 'death of the novel', Eagleton argues that we cannot ignore the shift from the dominance of writing in our cultures to a renewed emphasis on the spoken word, encouraged by radio, cinema, and television. 'The most minatory aspect of postmodernism', he maintains, 'is its audio-visual character' (1987: 7). Matshoba holds views similar to those of Ngugi. He sees his stories and autobiography as necessary records of the times he has lived through, as historical documents which 'portray an unsavoury reality for...those people [who] will not appear in the pages of future history books' (1981: v).

He considers film, however, to be the medium through which he can best reach his own people, and help them to understand their past and to influence their future. Matshoba has written a screenplay, *Menacing Shadows*, which has recently (1991) been filmed by the German Film Academy; he has published a play, *Seeds of War*, which is unstageable in practical terms because, as he admits, he envisaged it as a film while writing it, and he has read a play, *The Devil's Payoff*, which he intends rewriting for film. He has acted in two video productions, *The Mohale Str. Brothers* (the story of his two brothers both of whom were murdered), which was produced by Michael Hammon of West Germany; and *Apartheid's Children*, made by the United States Information Service but banned in South Africa. Kenneth Kaplan has produced a film

called *Hidden Farms*, which is an adaptation of Matshoba's short story 'A Glimpse of Slavery'.

*Seeds of War* enacts the story of Mhlab'uyalingana, a contract worker, about forty years old, whose family is threatened with forced removal from their home in Northern Natal to the new 'homeland' of KwaZulu. He has been away from home for 'the last twenty years' and refuses to believe that the house in which he has 'invested five-and-twenty years of sweat has been threatened with destruction' (p. 81). He refuses to comply with the instructions of the removal officials and moves his family back into their home. The officials return and command Mhlaba to leave. To demonstrate their power they deliberately run over the family dog. This incident compounds the growing feeling of impotence and futility in his life that leads to Mhlaba's death. His son, Maghawe, who has been in hiding with friends in the mountains, returns to bid his family farewell before leaving to join the Freedom Fighters, and finds his father hanging from a beam in the 'ghost house'.

Even reading the play without seeing it performed gives the clear impression that it is based on traditional forms and requires a critical perspective different from the traditional Western approach to drama. A Western approach would expect a linear progression to the story, culminating in a satisfactory ending which would have universal significance; it would probably expect realistic character portrayal and dialogue, and a script divided into acts and scenes: and, in general terms, a more or less definable conformity to one or other of the recognized sub-genres of drama.

Matshoba's script, however, is a mixture of dramatic dialogue interspersed with narrative passages which would require a narrator or chorus. Event and ritual are integrated in the drama which incorporates song and dance. As in traditional African oral drama, the narrator controls the dramatic action, drawing attention to and commenting on the significance of the events depicted, while filling in details concerning the characters or the past history of the community. Traditionally, the audience was always directly involved both as part of the performance and as critics, and would be called on for comment, perhaps on the accuracy of the story, on the talent of the actors, or even to assist in passing judgement on some character who is on trial in the drama. Reception theory has indicated that an audience, whether reader, viewer, or participant, plays an active part in the production of meaning, a role acknowledged in a work such as *Seeds of War* by numerous invocations to the audience. In a scene where 'the

deputy secretary of the state commissioner is to address the people of eNyakatho in the courtyard of eNgubeni', the narrator addresses the audience:

*Imagine how Mbuka must be feeling. It is the day  
of judgement for the other two chiefs....And  
imagine how Bhekizitha and Vikelisizwe must feel!*  
1981: 21.

Each scene is introduced by social comment and background detail of the characters and events, thus emphasizing the fictional status of the drama while at the same time reinforcing the 'reality' of the South African context. Dramatic dialogue is interrupted by song and dance, strongly reflecting traditional forms of drama which, unlike typical American or English musicals, weave song and dance into the story, the lyrics forming an integral part of what is happening to the people involved in the dramatic events. This also imparts ritual significance to these events. In one such scene contract workers are returning home by train singing communal songs, as is their habit. In response to one of the songs a man

jumps up and dances to the rhythm of the song,  
apparently happy to be about to meet his folks  
again. He stops dancing and starts strutting about  
in front of the others like a praise singer, until  
the song and the clapping are over, whereupon he  
pivots on his heel and faces his mates.  
1981: 54.

An exchange ensues, which is structured rather in the pattern of the American blues, a form which arose under similar circumstances, and is based on the sounds and movements of the train as an echo of the lives of an enslaved people:

The Dancer: When I come home, I greet the elders...  
Another: I would tell the boys to catch a goat to  
be slaughtered.  
Mhalaba: I should slaughter a sheep and go weed my  
forefather's graves...  
1981: 55.

Matshoba has described this rhythm in *Beyond the Minedumps*:

at the break of dawn the trains began to strike  
the heavy rhythm of the heartbeat of working life  
on their rails...  
MD: 1.

Early Negro blues was essentially an oral form which originated in the field-hollers and call-and-response patterns of collective work groups. All aspects of daily slave life came to be incorporated into the songs, particularly the sounds and rhythm of the train, which became a symbol of exile. David Coplan points out that since the processes of class formation within American and South African black urban communities ran in parallel, black American performance helped to unify urban African culture by providing a model for cultural change (1985: 236). As Johan Jacobs says, it was perhaps inevitable that Negro blues would 'find resonance in an African culture with a tradition of communal vocal music, of praise poetry and of songs by migrant workers' (1989: 6). Traditional blues combine worksongs, field-hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humour, and elegiac lament in a synthesis which is rendered by instruments such as guitar, harmonica, fiddle, bucket, jug, washboard and so on, and employs locomotive rhythms, train bells, and whistles in onomatopoeic references. The dominant sound of the blues is the instrumental imitation of train-wheels-over-track junctures. In South Africa the mine-dancers use many of the same instruments plus a rhythmic boot-slapping to create a similar effect. There are notable resonances in South African art forms which echo the 'hollers, cries, whoops and moans of black men and women working without recompense' (Baker, 1984: 8).

In *Seeds of War* the protagonist, contemplating suicide in order to escape bondage, converses with his 'other self' in a pattern similar to the typical question and answer pattern of the blues. It is clear that this scene could only be realized dramatically on film:

Mhlaba: Nkulunkulu wani. How I wish I were dead.

His other self: The only snag, son of man, is this:  
one cannot wish oneself away this firmament.

Mhlaba: But one day I shall be dead and all this, all of it,  
will be over.

His other self: Then you are not afraid to die?

Mhlaba: Not after this affliction...

His other self: Unfortunately your house, the shrine  
you built in which to breathe your  
last breath, has been destroyed by  
the forces of evil and you will have

to die without the privacy of a home.

1981: 96.

*Seeds of War* shows the devastating effects of the inability of the black father to play the symbolic role of the lawgiver and protector in a white racist culture. Not only is Mhlaba powerless to protect his family, but his son, knowing this, disobeys his father's injunction to stay home, and leaves to join the resistance movement. Matshoba's own father, portrayed fictionally in *Beyond the Minedumps* as the teacher of alternative history and as a pass-burning rebel, was a founder member of the ANC and close boyhood friend of Walter Sisulu, but eventually lost heart and withdrew from politics, to end his life in 1975 a broken and dispirited man. Richard Wright describes a similar chain of events in his life, which initially caused him to hate his father (*Black Boy* 1945: 22). Later he came to understand the overwhelming forces that led to his father's desertion of the family (*The Long Dream*, 1958).

The dominant system has been so deeply internalized by the black man that he has accepted the distinctions between whites and himself as 'natural', 'ontological' differences of species, not only at a conscious level but even at the pre-conscious level. Maghawe realizes that his father has finally been defeated by his own sense of self-violation, that his complicity with white control throughout his life has led to his emasculation. Such self-conscious scrutiny would normally be out of the reach of a man who has been thoroughly colonised. But by emphasizing the possibilities of his being recognized as fully human, the contradictions in Mhlaba's life - even in his dealings with the white man - are instrumental in creating a sense of conflict and self-violation. Other examples of how contradictions can undermine colonization can be found in 'A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana', when the narrator was forced to revise his ideas after he discovered that there were whites imprisoned on Robben Island for their part in the struggle for black liberation, and in *Beyond the Minedumps*, where the care and dedication of some of the white teachers in the schools which Thandi attended made him conscious of the possibility of achieving self-identity. In *Seeds of War* Maghawe refuses to accept the conditions which have led to his father's psychological defeat and chooses to play an active part in shaping his own consciousness. It can be seen that the task of achieving individual consciousness becomes necessary in a world that is the product of others' dreams, and where systems of knowledge and signification are enforced on the dispossessed person in order to produce docility, constraint and

helplessness.

The depiction of these 'negative' elements in black literature is seen by Abdul JanMohamed as a sort of 'negative dialectic', a 'major tactic in resisting hegemonic formation by establishing a specular relation with society's attempt to negate [the black boy]; he turns himself into a mirror that reflects the negation back at the hegemony.' He quotes Wright as asking: 'in what other way had the South allowed me to be natural, to be myself...except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression?' (JanMohamed, 1987: 247). Ndebele might disagree, and claim that the negation can only be negated by a demonstration of positive values. As I have mentioned, he did in fact take Matshoba to task for his negative portrayal of black life which, in Ndebele's opinion, results in the reader becoming 'almost totally grounded in [the] reality of [oppression]' (1984a: 46). A closer look at *Seeds of War* will, I think, reveal a great deal more than the representation of 'dejected peasants' (Ndebele, 1989: 49) and show that to depict and analyze the 'ordinary' in the lives of black people, although valuable, is insufficient in a situation where the ordinary has been perverted to the extent that the subjugation of all natural activities has been accepted as normal.

In the narrative passages which introduce each change of scene in the play, there are flashbacks to the past of a character or of the tribe, another device which could only adequately be handled on film. Once more the audience is addressed directly:

*The indomitable mothers of Africa have donned  
their husbands' armour and are going out to face  
the enemy as you shall presently see.  
Remember Nongqawuse, remember Mahtatisi,  
remember Modjadji, remember Ngoyi?*

1981: 19.

The litany of historical or legendary heroic female figures of the amaXhosa echoes the techniques of traditional praise singers, in their appeal to a particular interpretive community. Only recently I experienced a similar performance in an actual contemporary context and realized how enduring and widespread this form is, even in urbanized communities. The scene was a New Brighton (Port Elizabeth) dental clinic, where some hundred people of all ages and types waited for treatment from the 'government' dentist. Led by a deep-voiced matron who gave the calls, they were all singing. The responses were sung in parts, some in alto, others in baritone, a third group in bass, all in perfect harmony. The effect was that of a well-trained



choir, although the patients came from all walks of life and lived in many different parts of the town. I commented on the beauty of the song, and the clinic sister said: 'I wish you could understand the words for they are singing of the goodness and wisdom of their doctor.' What I was hearing were traditional praise songs, familiar to all, led by an *ntsomi*, and sung in the middle of a city in 1989!

The integration of myth and traditional practice with contemporary concerns in a dramatic production lends particular significance to the enacted events. The processes of transition by which a society adjusts itself to new events and the tragedies which may be implicit in these changes are portrayed through a fusion of contemporary meanings (as suggested by the train, community songs, and women's laments) and the ritual implications of traditional symbols (libation to the ancestors, the sacrificial goat, mythic heroines). The heroism of Mhlaba's son, Maghawe, is reinforced in the course of the action by the narrator's explanation of the Zulu adage: 'umuntu uyalilandela igame lakhe',

*which means that a person does act his or her name out. Maghawe is 'a brave person' and bravery is associated with honour, with the nobility of being able to face up to overwhelming odds, to defend oneself and the weak, and therefore it is a virtuous disposition... When his son was born Mhlab'uyalingana named him Maghawe, the valiant one, because he did not want a son who would always be running home crying to complain that he had been beaten up by other boys.*

1981: 72.

Mhlaba's pride in his daughter's stubborn refusal to reveal to him the whereabouts of Maghawe's hideout ('within no time she has grown into a fighting woman') echoes the earlier references to Xhosa heroines, and presages the closing speech of the narrator which elevates a common incident in the lives of black South Africans (in this case, forced removal) to the status of epic battle that ends, as in so many of the stories, on a note of 'a luta continua' :

*And so Mhlabu'yalingana's trial comes to an end. The war continues for Bhekizitha and Vikelisizwe who have carried Mhlaba to his place among his ancestors with their own hands and, with the might of all the people behind them, are contributing significantly to the fight against oppression. When the names of the heroes are written theirs*

*too shall be among them.*

*Maghawe has joined the ranks of the forces of  
Armageddon.*

*Mbuka sold his soul for a small price...When  
the people speculate, they say that he will be  
punished with the enemy when the time comes.*

*Maybe it shall be so, for the seeds of hatred,  
the seeds of war, have been sown in the fertile soil  
of the people's grieving hearts, and have begun to  
germinate.*

1981: 1981: 105.

Traditional ritual is used not merely to assert the continuity of past and present but, by the interaction of past and present, to create images which relate to the living experience of the spectators and enable them to see the possibility for regeneration and change. As Soyinka says: 'Drama is by its very nature a revolutionary art form' (Morell, 1975: 75). Although the suicide of the protagonist and the disintegration of his family as a unit give the viewer little cause for hope, the reading of *regeneration* into the title, in the light of the concluding passage (quoted above), provides a note of affirmation that allows us to see *Seeds of War* alternately not as a tragic representation of an oppressed and defeated people, but as an epic of their struggle.

Ndebele suggests that the depiction of 'ordinary' events in the lives of those who are perceived to be different may serve more effectively than 'spectacle' in rebuilding a sense of pride, and, at the same time, serve to illustrate a common humanity between oppressed and oppressor. Ndebele may be correct to insist that this is the first necessary step towards reconstruction, but as Matshoba's film play recognizes, other steps are also necessary in a society in which the cultures of the oppressed have been denigrated. Only an epistemic 'epiphany' can ensure the recognition of 'difference' as a positive force that would have to be acknowledged in the academy. The 'old building' must be torn down, says John Wideman, in the parallel context of Afro-American reconstruction, and describes the dilemmas with which he is faced in the present academic situation:

The historical problem is unavoidably there, and how you solve it creates a sort of 'out of the frying pan into the fire' dilemma. There is an Afro-American tradition. There are Afro-American writers working right now; it makes sense to talk about us as a group. It is natural, enlightening, intelligent to approach the work that way, but at the same time, to do so perpetuates the whole

wrong-headed notion of looking at things in terms of black and white, and in our culture this implies not simply a distinction, but black inferiority. In academia, Mr Dewy-eyed Optimistic (who is really Mr Turn-Them-Back in disguise) believes that the purpose of Afro-American classes is remedial, a fine-tuning of curriculum, and argues that the millennium will arrive when American literature classes include *Invisible Man*.

The real challenge of Afro-American culture gets lost. It is not a question of making a little more room at the inn but of tearing the old building down, letting the tenants know their losses are such that no one is assured of a place, that the notion of permanently owning a place is as defunct as the inn.

1989: 46.

The real challenge of 'other' cultures to the existing canon lies in the different content of the other culture, and Matshoba's unpublished screenplay, *Menacing Shadows* (abbreviated to MS for page references), seems to me to have the appeal of a popular entertainment which at the same time contains the 'seeds of war'. The background is a South African gaol. The rhetoric of protest is unavoidable, but chiefly the story is built up through the suggestion of setting and the actions of characters. Zoom shots or slow fade-outs evoke meaning in, and the dialogue creates a dynamic interaction among several black men in a gaol. The moral questions are thus introduced through dramatic action rather than by way of the authorial comment Matshoba employs in the short stories. As in *Seeds of War*, song and dance are interwoven into the story. The convicts 'keep courage' by singing of their future release, which they anticipate by celebrating the imminent release of Satch, the protagonist:

Themba rises to his feet and coaxes the cellmates to sing:

Themba: 'Come on': (sings): 'Solomoni, Solomoni'

Chorus: 'Yo-o-o-o, yo-o-o

Sesikhumbul' (we remember).

Chorus: 'Khaya ekhalambazo'

(home where the axe grinds)

'Sesikhumbul' ekhaya eSoweto'.

MS: 5.<sup>2</sup>

Once more the plaintive note of the blues is recognizable; but home, instead of a dimly remembered Africa, is 'Soweto', 'where the axe grinds'. Irele identifies this 'type of literature'

as belonging to what he calls 'the third level of orality':

If there is anything distinctive about this literature, it is what I'd like to call its organic mode of existence. In production, realization, and transmission, the text inheres in the very physiology of the human frame, and is expressed as voice, in gestures, and in immediate performance. The spoken word therefore achieves its plenitude here, as total presence...

The factor that I've termed 'organic' is extremely important for the peculiar forms of African oral literature. Lord and Parry have accustomed us to the formulaic structure of heroic poems. But orality is more than formulaic - it determines the active and intensive deployment of parallelisms, anaphora, parataxis, and other features that give life, as it were, to the structures of expression predetermined within the culture. Nor must we forget the special role played by sonic values in this literature: onomatopoeia, ideophones, and especially tonal patterns that depend for their effect on the immediacy of realization peculiar to oral forms and which proclaim the primacy of living speech in human languages.

1990: 55-56.

Notable in this script, written ten years after *Call Me Not a Man*, is the absence of any racial bitterness. Both black and white prison warders maltreat prisoners, and convicts are brutal to each other, as in any prison narrative.

In the opening scene Satch is harrassed by the warder Stoneface. When he is returned to the cell, his cellmates ask if there is 'trouble'. 'Only from Him', replies Satch, "cause Fatty thinks I still stand a chance of going straight when I leave' (p. 4). After his release Satch tries unsuccessfully to 'hitch' a lift. Cars drive past, and one seems about to run him down. The 'colour' of the driver is not specified. A police jeep stops but Satch declines the warder's offer of a lift. Eventually he is picked up by a white farmer who, despite being told that Satch had been imprisoned for car-theft, leaves him in the driver's seat while going to buy food. The farmer returns to the van and asks Satch to check if his wallet is in the cubbyhole, whereupon Satch sees a gun in the cubbyhole. The farmer goes off again leaving Satch still in the driver's seat, keys in the ignition, and gun within reach. Instead of a sermonizing narrator it is the camera which captures Satch's potential 'to go straight', and 'the Whitey's' potential to trust an

unknown black. In terms of the South African reality this scene seems hardly credible, as if Matshoba were indulging a romantic fantasy. The story, however, revolves around this very point - the possibility that prejudice and automatic mistrust between the races can be overcome. Matshoba's aim can be seen, idealistically, to be the overturning of stereotypes in order to reveal a common humanity, or, in Fanon's words, 'to reach for the universal'. Later, when Satch arrives in Soweto, a black taxi-driver refuses to charge him for the ride: 'Keep it, I see you're new around here, mfowetu...welcome outside!'. Once again the viewer is made aware of a reversal of values: in a society where morality has been turned on its head, the convict becomes the hero.

The scriptwriter makes no attempt to glamorize Satch or to evoke undue sympathy for his plight. A flashback reveals that he was captured while holding a 'terrified middle-aged white man' at knifepoint. Earlier Satch had explained to the farmer that it was 'not just for kicks, sir. We were hungry for many things which we could not have unless...' (p. 29). Although Satch is not portrayed as the 'poor, innocent, wrongly accused' character of so many prison narratives, his ordinary humanity and potential rectitude is developed through the dramatic action and dialogue. He is neither martyr nor criminal, although elements of each arise out of the situation in which he has been reared. This tension becomes more dramatic after he arrives home and meets up with his former 'tsotsi' friends 'Sipho' and 'Mxoksi'. With them is the sixteen-year-old 'KID', an 'avid apprentice in the bad ways of "THE TWILIGHT CHILDREN"' (p. 58). Satch's wife Thandi strongly disapproves of the renewed friendship: 'Don't befriend them, lovey, they'll cause you to backslide' (p. 61). Satch is nonetheless confident of his ability to 'go straight' and joins the group to visit a 'stokvel', described in the glossary as

a credit circulation system among friends whereby the one whose turn it is to receive the stake money may and usually does sell beer at inflated prices to raise the basic stake. The party may last from one to several days and is a popular fundraising scheme in Soweto.

MS: 61-62.

In this scene a social context is given vivid immediacy. Neither the camera nor the dialogue is deployed to suggest a moral judgement; instead the action highlights the vast differences between the lives of the people in Soweto and those in the affluent suburbs of Johannesburg. Emphasis is placed on the mundane amusements and small kindnesses shared by a group of

ordinary men. When Satch queries the presence in the group of the young gangster, Kid, his friends explain:

Sipho: Spent a weekend in the jug with him under my wing and ever since he's followed me around like a dog. Tried to discourage him but he has a forlorn look about him that I don't want to see.

Mxoksi: You'd need someone too if you'd nearly been flushed down a toilet and been found and brought up by a wretched old woman.

Satch: He could not have picked a worse person to identify with!

Sipho: Mos, better people won't have anything to do with desolate kids. They're too preoccupied with being nice and good and living it up.

MS: 63-64.

Matshoba shows that even among 'tsotsis' there exists a code of honour, and a recognition of common 'humanity'. The somewhat pretentious language used by Sipho and the psychological insight he reveals leads me to think that, once more, Matshoba is attempting to show that there is a great deal more to the 'ordinary' black person than the average white supposes. Julianne Burton, a critic of Third World cinema, calls this a 'strategy of substitution' whereby the 'otherness' of some indigenous discourse 'turns the normative assumptions of Western civilisation on its head' (1985: 13). (The same device was evident in Satch's encounters with the white farmer and the taxi-driver, and is particularly striking in Tata's revised account of the arrival of the white man in South Africa in *Beyond the Minedumps*, where the 'primitive savages' of the 'dark continent' are shown to be democratic, compassionate and articulate, while 'the flayed people...were so backward as not to know man's relationship to the rest of nature (p.22)).

Satch declines an invitation to join the gang on a 'jol' and returns home as the scene shifts to the station where Sipho, Mxoksi and Kid board a train 'in typical tsotsi style' (p. 67). They are obviously bent on crime. When detectives search 'suspicious characters', Sipho escapes arrest by concealing his knife in the nappy bag of a young mother. In Johannesburg the three friends hold up an Indian storekeeper and rob the till. Apart from the dramatic excitement of

this episode the detailed directions for background setting provide a highly colourful and intriguing illustration of a typical train ride from Soweto to Johannesburg. A section of Matshoba's original hand-written script, in which the journey is described, is reproduced here as a demonstration of a text so beautifully produced that its inscription is a work of art in itself: the very inscribing of the document, apart from its contents, being of historical significance. A further extract is included in Appendix 11.

SIPHO

Hullo, sweetheart.

SCHOOLGIRL struggles to free herself but SIPHO's grip is strong for her.

SCHOOLGIRL looks up at SIPHO with a mixture of distaste & fear.

HO grins seditiously.

SIPHO

I say kunjani; how's it, sweetheart?

SCHOOLGIRL

Let me go! I'm not your sweetheart.

SIPHO

You forget quickly, neh?

SCHOOLGIRL

Leave me alone!

THE SCHOOLMATES and the VENDORS look on helplessly.

ST. STATION BRIDGE. MIDMORNING.

HO, MXOLISI and three other YOUTHS watch SIPHO from the top of the station bridge.

MXOLISI

Hey monna (man). Let the schoolchild be.

SIPHO

Mind your business, ndaba (news monger).

ST. RAILWAY TRACKS. MIDMORNING.

A train comes into sight around a bend and rumbles to the station.

ST. STATION BRIDGE TOP. MIDMORNING.

HOYED NEWSVENDOR plays patience with stacks of coins.



IMUTERS run from the ticket booking office towards the train descending to the platform to board the train.

SIPHO whistles for Siphho and follows Mxolisi after the other IMUTERS.

ST. STREET BELOW STATION. MIDMORNING.

KID releases the SCHOOLGIRL and runs up the stairs to the top of the bridge.

SCHOOLGIRL

Sies!

ST. STATION. PLATFORM. MIDMORNING.

KID runs down the stairs to the platform behind Mxolisi and SIPHO in typical tsotsi style.

Mxolisi and SIPHO board the train as the CONDUCTOR blows his whistle, hangs out of his door, waves and the train gets into motion.

ST. MOBILE THIRD CLASS TRAIN COACH. MIDMORNING.

PASSENGERS fill the longitudinal benches along the sides as well as the wide aisles.

KID and Mxolisi squeeze in among the seated PASSENGERS.

SIPHO leans against a metal post facing KID and Mxolisi, looking at the PASSENGERS around him contemptuously.

Two DETECTIVES enter the coach from one end, make their way down the crowded aisle, picking suspicious CHARACTERS and searching them.

Before the DETECTIVES reach him and while PASSENGERS are concentrating on them, SIPHO casually slips a hunting knife out of his waistband and puts it without being seen into a nappy bag belonging to a YOUNG MOTHER with her baby strapped to her back.

Throughout the story the characters emerge as individuals with no racial stereotyping, a play which Ndebele would have to acknowledge as a 'return to the ordinary', and one which seems quite remarkable considering the history of 'protest' literature in South Africa. It is regrettable that Matshoba did not manage to have *Menacing Shadows* produced at the time it was written, for it would certainly have made an impact on both critics and viewers and, in my opinion, would have provided that 'positive value' called for by MacCabe, a value which supercedes the 'relevance' and 'necessity' required in cultural as opposed to artistic expression.

In the video *The Mohale Str. Brothers: two brothers, two murders* the scriptwriter, Matshoba, plays the part of 'Mtutu Matshoba', brother of the two murdered men. He also acts at times as the narrator of, or commentator on, events depicted in the story, relating these events to events in the larger context of South African life as experienced by black persons. During the film he is interviewed by the director, for he has witnessed the incidents being recalled in the film. Some viewers who know Matshoba's life story will recognize him in the role of narrator; others will see him as an actor playing the part of a man who has witnessed events which are familiar also to their lives. To foreign viewers, perhaps, the story will seem to be an imaginative re-creation of life (and death) in any black South African township. The actual detail and the imaginative shaping overlap so as to create the possibility of different levels of appreciation in different viewers.

The film opens with a funeral procession down a typical Sowetan street. The camera zooms in on the gravestone of:

DILIZA B MATSHOBA  
24.05.86.  
AGED 34

At the graveside stand Matshoba, his mother, and his sister Nota, played by themselves. Mrs Matshoba reminisces about her three sons: Mtutuzeli, sympathetic and helpful; Diliza, softhearted; and Fezi, rebellious black sheep who holds a special place in her affections. Later Mtutu's sister claims that it was his mother's 'spoiling' that resulted in Fezi's 'naughtiness'.

The scene switches to Mzimhlope station (now familiar to white readers as the scene of recent violence) with a train in the background. Once again the sounds of a train provide a mournful 'blues' background as Matshoba assumes the narration, and describes how his memories have caused him to suffer from depression which has at times led to excessive

drinking. He re-creates his early impressions of Orlando East. The township was new, with no electricity, and only bucketsewerage. He remembers how the station became the arena for gun-warfare between the migrant workers, who lived in the Meadowlands hostel, and the youth groups of Orlando East: the Hazels, the Banzins, and so on. During these troubles Fezi 'picked up a violent streak' and, after Mtutu went away to Wilberforce (this event was fictionally described in *Beyond the Minedumps*), he had to fend for himself.

A series of interviews with Matshoba, Mrs Matshoba, Nota, and various friends of Fezi and Diliza allow the viewer to piece together portraits of the two deceased brothers against a background of black life in Soweto in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Mrs Matshoba shows photographs of Fezi and Diliza to the interviewer, and the camera moves in to give the viewer a close-up portrait of each man, while the individual characters are sketched in the interviews. Fezi emerges as a ne'er do well, in and out of gaol, yet 'gentle at home' (Nota); he is something of a Robin Hood figure who happily distributes his ill-gotten gains to the people who live in his street. His family refuses to accept any of his stolen goods. At the same time both brothers were imprisoned on Robben Island - Fezi in the criminal wing, Diliza in the political wing. (These events provided the reason for the 'pilgrimage to the isle of Makana' in the story of that name.) Fezi was eventually shot by Oupa Elijah Khumalo to whom he owed money and who was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for the killing.

The story of Diliza, which was introduced in the opening scene at his grave, is resumed at this point with an explicit close-up view of the slaughter of a sheep: the slitting of the throat; the blood caught in an enamel bowl; the final shot fading into the blood in the basin. Slaughter of a sheep in the backyard is an ordinary task performed in almost every Soweto household each Saturday. It is also a ritual of symbolic importance in both African and Christian religion. This episode, then, embraces all three significations: an ordinary event, a libation to the ancestors, and the crucifixion of a saviour. It imbues Diliza's life with symbolic weight. His friends describe how 'he cared for people': children; old ladies; unruly elements. 'He protected the community from the likes of Fezi', comments Mtutu dryly, but his friends stress how he also tried to help, and redeem, the 'likes of Fezi'. His sister remarks that Diliza 'was very different...religious'.

Diliza Matshoba was sent to Robben Island for two years for unspecified reasons. The police came and took 'his trunk of books', says his mother, but she was not informed as to the nature of his offence. After his release Diliza formed a support group to aid the families of

detained people, and this soon earned him a reputation as a champion of human rights. In 1985 Diliza became involved in political action, mainly as a mediator between the UDF and Azapo, pleading for unity in the struggle. He disappeared in May 1986 and, after exhausting all channels of enquiry, Mrs Matshoba says she went to the police mortuary. Before stating her purpose she was asked if she had come for Diliza Matshoba, and told that he had been killed in a motor accident. Mrs Matshoba relates the ensuing events quite calmly and dispassionately, staring into the camera. The viewer is left to construe the pain, anger, and hopelessness behind the calm, strong face. She tells how she and Mtutu went to identify Diliza's body:

'He had a hole in his forehead and marks on his back like a sjambok - no blood to indicate an accident. There was four cents in his pocket and no reference book, yet they knew who he was!'

The camera returns to the backyard of the house. The act of slaughtering a lamb and letting the blood is repeated.

The orations at Diliza's funeral are given by the Reverend Beyers Naude and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the film ends as it began with Mrs Matshoba, Mtutu and Nota at the graveside. The repetition of this scene as well as that of the slaughter suggests a circularity, an implication that the depicted events have become 'ordinary' by their regularity in black township life where, year after year, families lose their children because of action by the police. The sharp contrast between two children from the same family, a 'black sheep' and a 'white lamb', emphasizes different perspectives within the black community. The difference between brothers is, however, bridged by the love of the mother, suggesting perhaps that unity in difference may be possible. Apart from its documentary intention the film can be seen to convey an overriding warning to those who perceive a 'black identity' as 'all bad', and to those who, in the interests of unity, portray a unified black identity that is 'all good'. This implies a radical relativism which questions both Eurocentricism and African ethno-nationalism.

How are these attempts, by a black writer, to document the history of a people and to protest against the injustices inflicted upon them to be judged in terms of their potential to offer alternatives to either Eurocentric or ethno-nationalistic representations in art? Numerous attempts have been made to recuperate the products of the oral tradition. Exotic art has been

collected in volumes of 'Xhosa fables', 'Aboriginal myths', and so on. But such projects always involve a dislocation from their original function as performance pieces. They become translated into the written modes of representation through which alien readers are taught to access, consume, and privilege *their* culture and its models of reality. All aesthetic quality is destroyed and what is left is content without form. Bob Hodge, writing on Aboriginal 'coffee-table books', says that 'there is a tacit assumption that the original would have been so incomprehensible in form as well as content that there is no point in trying to do justice to it' (cited in Tapping, 1989: 87). This idea seems to echo Gates in "'Talkin' That Talk' and brings to mind the recent criticism of the *Staffrider* anthology (a collection of ten years of contributions) which, some critics felt, was a falsification of the stories because they had been removed from their original context of reception in black township writing groups. One does not want to deny that such acts of recuperation can serve a purpose in helping to popularize indigenous works. In the process, however, the traces of non-literate culture are usually destroyed.

Craig Tapping feels that a fresh approach, which uses a perspective taken from within the original form of 'exotic' works, can provide a 'new act of mediation' for Western-trained critics:

And here, the very old begins to look like the very new. So-called primitive cultures - systems where-in shamans, historians, bards or even ordinary representatives of a generation or time - stage and record communal stories and collectively shared narratives, and value what is told, not only for its content, but rather for its form. A performative aesthetic operates: just as it does when we read the most up-to-date post modern document or text. What we value is not what we are told, but the play through which the artist-creator reveals what we are told...so we have the opportunity to recognize that what begins by looking alien and exotic, or primitive and marginalized, is actually very close to our post-industrial existence.

1989: 91.

I am suggesting that audio-visual works are possibly the most effective in attracting a wide audience and providing a challenge to reigning cultural dominance; I am, however, not excluding the possibility of written work gaining popular appeal. A new perspective which gives historical significance to works hitherto considered marginal, and which studies such works

as central in their own right, would probably have to recognize the oral and performative aspects of literature that derives from previously oral cultures. These works can be made accessible through a 'new act of mediation'.

### Notes

1. The 'Caffres at Hyde-Park-Corner', as they came to be known, were a group of thirteen Zulus, taken to London in 1853 by one A.T. Caldecott of Pietermaritzburg, and exhibited as exotic curiosities at a Hyde Park Corner theatre.
2. Quotations from *Menacing Shadows* are taken from the unedited, hand-written manuscript. Changes have been made to spelling or punctuation only where it was necessary to ensure clarity. Page numbers

are quoted as they appear in the manuscript.

## Conclusion

In this study I have discussed four very different generic forms: the short story, the novel, the drama and the filmscript. In Chapter One my aim was mainly to show that, because of the influence on black writing of oral residuality and African traditional philosophy, it is inappropriate to analyze such work using only the Western criteria of print culture. In Chapter Two I examined Matshoba's autobiographical novel, *Beyond the Minedumps*, with the aim of showing that black South African writing emerges partly in response to racism and subjugation and, as a result, evinces many of the features typical of Afro-American slave writing. In both cases the search for 'identity' is paramount, and it is this search that questions the 'metropolitan' tradition. The identification of a common purpose in discourse of minorities, then, strengthens the base for such a challenge. Although the possibility for subversion exists in both the short story and the novel forms their effects are restricted because of the high degree of illiteracy in the audiences they seek to influence. In Chapter Three I suggested that film, because of its wider appeal, and the fact that it can be more readily presented in the vernacular (or in popular idiom), has the potential to bring about a change in perspective, both for the man in the street and for the academic.

If I am right in suggesting that works such as I have been describing have 'oppositional' value and, if placed on educational syllabuses in South Africa, could gain a position of central importance, then how can they in their turn resist being canonized? Or, on the other hand, if cultural studies is so subversive, is it capable of generalization beyond a specific situation? MacCabe's solution to this apparent 'Catch 22' is to suggest that, while there will always be local and specific elements, it is still possible to construct a reading list in relation to a series of questions which, unlike those posed for 'English studies', are 'not given in advance by some mystical national identity'. The result would be a reading list which contains traditional classics as well as a variety of contemporary media; it would include the possibility of local variations, but would not be a canon in that it would be subject to change in relation to our contemporary culture. Such an approach should circumvent the weakness, identified by both Von Rimscha and MacCabe, of a body of works securing their institutional ground as contemporary studies

by being defined according to a canonical view rather than in relation to genuine questions and problems concerning contemporary culture: 'questions and problems which will almost certainly lead back to a pre-modern past' (MacCabe, 1987: 8). Ironically, the questions and problems associated with the analysis of texts that link us to oral traditions will present us western-trained critics with 'new objects of knowledge' (Foucault, 1970: 387). As Houston Baker points out:

Tropological thought is a discursive mode that employs unfamiliar (or exotic) figures to qualify what is deemed 'traditional' in a given discourse. ... one might assert that attempts to signify the force of the economics of slavery by invoking buildings and blues constitute an analytical move designed to incorporate into reality phenomena to which traditional historiography generally denies the status 'real'. The end of the tropological enterprise is the alteration of reality itself.

1984: 82.

And according to Sylvia Wynters, 'new objects of knowledge', or an altered reality, call for 'the construction of new conceptual tools and theoretical foundations, which this time go beyond not only the hegemonic paradigms of literary criticism but also beyond the grounding analogic of the episteme or "fundamental arrangements of knowledge" of which our present practice of literary criticism (in effect of normal 'majority' discourse) is an inter-connected component' (1987: 208).

Wynters compares this epistemic rupture with the change in 'knowledge' effected by the move from supernaturally guaranteed descriptive statements (such as those found in chivalric romance) to the secularizing idealism of the novel genre, embodied in the 'figure of Man' (p. 211). At the same time she recognizes that there is a need to move beyond the ontology of the 'figure of Man' with its image of a 'globally dominant Western bourgeoisie' in order to be able to receive our new objects of knowledge (p. 208). These objects may be black, female, oriental, homosexual, or 'lower' class: any category, in fact, which is subordinated within the organizing principle of difference as sanctioned by our present 'symbolic contract'. In order to be able to question this ontologically subordinated function, 'minority discourse' cannot merely be another voice in the present conversation. Rather it should bring closure to a conversation



which, in the words of Wynters, 'is now as conceptually and imaginatively exhausted...as was the conversation of philosophical idealism, which through the outworn genre of chivalric romances, had also continued to disseminate an illusionary and anachronistic chivalresque mode of believing/behaving/desiring' (p. 233). The task for those like Wynters, Gates, Baker, Irele, Wideman and others, who recognize the need for an epistemic rupture, then, will be to disseminate the 'new objects of knowledge' which have been, or are being, produced throughout the English-speaking world. This involves guiding the literate to areas of knowledge which they might have been taught to despise, and opening areas of knowledge to the non-literate through media other than 'literature'.

In the words of Nancy Hartsock:

The critical steps are, first, using what we know about our lives as a basis for critique of the dominant culture, and, second, creating alternatives. When the various 'minority' experiences have been described, and when the significance of these experiences as a ground for critique of the dominant institutions and ideologies of society is better recognized, we will have at least the tools with which to begin to construct an account of the world sensitive to the realities of race and gender, as well as class. To paraphrase Marx, the point is to change the world, not simply to redescribe ourselves or reinterpret the world yet again.

1987: 206.

If the works of Matshoba, and others like him, are to achieve the aims set out in the foregoing discussion, a concerted effort on the part of publishers, stage producers and filmmakers is required. They cannot be expected, however, to enter into ventures which are unprofitable and must therefore be convinced that such works will have popular appeal. As I suggested in Chapter Three popular acceptance, in turn, should force the academy to take cognisance of the value of this type of writing. Mzwaki Mbuli has already proved my point. He has shown himself to be 'the people's poet' and, as a result, has become the object of critical interest and the subject of several academic papers. His work has been incorporated into the syllabuses of a number of universities, not only in departments of Drama, but also in departments of English.

We seem finally to return responsibility to critics and teachers, as mediators, who can

offer students and other readers new perspectives on writings that show 'an alternative history'. The need is to convince publishers and educators of the value of works which do not comply with the expectations of the Western canon. I hope I have suggested that the texts of Mtutuzeli Matshoba offer us an interesting opportunity to 'decolonise our minds'.

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