

Miriam Tlali's *Muriel at Metropolitan*: Black Consciousness and the Search for Self-Affirmation

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to demonstrate the power of non-conformity with regard to literary projections. Though written in 1969, Miriam Tlali's novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* exhibits forceful portrayals of Apartheid South Africa's socio-economic and political system. The novel explores, in the crudest manner possible, the realities of racial inequality in South African society. Tlali, in my view, succeeds in her intentions of telling the South African story exactly as it was by ignoring the existing literary conventions. Her chosen form of literary creation was deliberate; as she was certainly not unaware of the conventional forms of literary expression. Her deliberate disregard of conventional forms of literary creation was frowned upon by such critics as Njabulo Ndebele and caused much debate on the relativity of literature in the 60's, 70's and 80's. This article also attempts to show how ideological persuasions, in some cases, influence the creation of literary works, as it was the case with *Protest Fiction*. Perhaps by visiting texts of old, particularly vilified and marginalized ones, we can learn to appreciate the fact that we cannot confine literary art to conventional forms alone; the diversity of a society and its particular conditions may sometimes require unconventional forms for its literary portrayals. The point here is that Tlali chooses to portray the harsh truths about racial relations in South Africa in a manner that reflects surface levels of that reality. It is poignant to point out that the irony of the South African condition is that much of the ills of the Apartheid system still infest the South African Society. Political masters have changed but conditions are basically more or less the same. South Africa needs writers like Miriam Tlali to mirror in their works the South African reality.

1. Introduction

In *Muriel at Metropolitan*, Miriam Tlali takes her first step into the world of literacy expression and production. She wrote the novel in 1969 but it was published in 1975 by Ravan Press after having been rejected by many publishing houses in South Africa. Ravan Press Published this novel only after removing certain extracts they thought would certainly offend the Censorship Board – the South African literacy watchdog. But despite this effort, the novel was banned almost immediately after publication because the Censorship Board pronounced it undesirable in the South African political context. This meant that the novel had touched a raw nerve of the Apartheid system.

Muriel at Metropolitan can be regarded as a fictionalized autobiography of Miriam Tlali which details her working experiences. The novel explores the relationship between black and white South Africans, particularly in the workplace. Tlali also mirrors the oppression and exploitation of her people and how the Apartheid regime maintained and applied its race laws. It is worth noting that *Muriel at Metropolitan* and the subsequent works Tlali produced are works produced with particular purposeful aims. This literature, called in some quarters 'protest fiction', was written with the express aim of exposing the evils of the Apartheid system and conscientizing the black people. As Tlali herself has stated in numerous interviews, her work is a deliberate tool of the art of exposition. She has, therefore, shown very little respect if any for so-called conventional forms of literacy projection. In a paper delivered in Amsterdam before the Committee Against Censorship, she makes her position and perhaps that of some fellow writers clear. She defiantly charges:

To the Philistines, the banners of books, the critics ... We black South African writers (who are faced with the task of conscientizing our people and ourselves are writing for those whom we know are the relevant audience. We are not going to write in order to qualify into your definition of what you describe as "true art". Our main objective is not to receive ballyhoo comments on our works. What is more important is that we should be allowed to reach our audience. Our duty is to write for our people and about them (1988:199)

2. Assertions of Proponents

In a defence of the form that Tlali's art assumes, Cecily Lockett writes in an article entitled 'The Fabric of Experience: A critical perspective on the writing of Miriam Tlali' that:

Miriam Tlali is an African writer working within a third world context and her aim is to represent her people and their aspirations. Her project is primarily political and humanistic, rather than aesthetic or formal. Tlali rejects what she terms "intellectualism" and in her writing often shows little respect for traditional generic categories of "novel" and "short story", (Clayton) 1989:278.

What this assertion does is to contextualize Tlali's work but what it fails to do is to define value laden terms such as "aesthetic" or "formal". Despite her almost convincing defence of Tlali's work, she does not explain what she means by these terms: how "aesthetic and formal" literary forms can be differentiated from "unaesthetic and informal" literature and from which perspective she views protest fiction or any other literature. What Lockett also fails to note is the fact that so-called protest fiction writers practice their art intentionally and that they are quite aware of other definitions and conventions of literary art. Their art is consciously practiced in defiance of so-called conventional forms of literature. In his introduction to *Forced Landing*, Mthobi Mutloatshe bluntly echoes Tlali's sentiments on this thus:

We will have to 'donder' conventional literature: old fashioned critics and reader alike. We are going to 'pee', 'spit and shit' on literary conventions before we are through; we are going to 'kick' and 'pull' and 'push' and 'drag' literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what critics have to say (1987:5).

Richard Ciive rubber-stamps this line of argument by quoting Arthur Nortjie in his introduction to Tlali's *Mihloti*:

*For some of us must storm the castles
Some define the happenings (1988:xiii).*

Of course Tlali and other protest fiction writers "define the happenings" as Clive correctly notes. However, I am not supposing that Clive, by virtue of the quotation, is a proponent of protest fiction. On the contrary, he is merely stating the nature of Tlali's work and the quotation is simply an emphasis of this. What should become apparent here is that Tlali's work and that of other protest fiction writers is regarded by these writers themselves as a contribution to the black man's struggle in South Africa. This type of literature, of necessity, does not conform to any old-fashioned form of literature, it rather advances the case for artistic relatively. Brenda Cooper quotes Vladimir Mayakovsky in this regard as having observed that:

We, the poets of the Left Front, never claim that we alone possess the secrets of poetical creativity. But we are the only ones who want to lay these secrets open, the only ones who don't want to surround the creative process with a catchpenny religious artistic aura of sanctity (1992:1).

3. Text Expressing Ideology

This perspective is so clearly articulated in Tlali's first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*. In the novel the narrator details her daily working experiences in a furniture and electronics store. Muriel, the main character, finds herself exposed to an environment which actually becomes a microcosm of life in South Africa. Relationships between black and white people are explored in an insightful manner. Muriel's white colleagues behave in a typical manner – frequently projecting expressions of superiority to Black people. Blacks, on the other hand, are portrayed as the oppressed and the exploited. Muriel's resentment of this status quo is apparent throughout the novel. Her portrayal of the sensitiveness and insecurity of the police organ of the state is shocking. For instance, Muriel was late for work one morning because she had to appear before the Security Branch at a police station. Muriel's niece had applied for a permit to visit her in South Africa. The hawk-eyed Security Branch had to know the reasons for her visit because she might pose a threat to the security of the country. The following extract is a conversation between Muriel and a white employee at Metropolitan Radio.

*"Where is she from? (The white woman asked)
"From Botswana". (Muriel replied).
"Where?"
"Bechuanaland"
"Why didn't you say so then? What did you call it ... Bo-what?"*

"Botswana. It is not called Bechuanaland any more now".

"Oh is that all, you were visited by the security police several times only to say you know who your sister's daughter is. It sounds childish to me. What for? Didn't you ask?"

"I was told it was for security reasons. Our security might be threatened by her visit to that of unknown persons. I understand that,"

What do you mean "Our security", who's our?"

"The security of all of us, everybody in this Republic. That 's why I've got to keep Mr Bloch waiting and everybody else". And I thought to myself, to think that my poor little niece is not even aware that she is so important. That her innocent request to pay me a visit can be regarded as a threat to the security of the great Republic of South Africa (1975:165).

The above extract is a clear documentation of the South African reality prior to 1994. Muriel's white colleague exhibits ignorance, naivety bordering on stupidity and a superiority complex. In her rendering of the black experience, Tlali exposes and indicts the South African social system.

As the character Muriel is drawn by experiences into a direct confrontation with the realities of the South African situation she gradually begins to psychologically liberate herself. Her indecisiveness turns to concrete resolve because she finally discovers herself. This is reflected at the end of the novel when after enduring the insults of her white colleagues and being an indirect collaborator in the exploitation of her own people, she resigns from her job. When Muriel could not get a job at another company because the white owner had not built a separate office and a toilet for her as a black person, she realizes that the whole South African socio-political business is a farce and she refuses to be a part of it. She says:

These damnable laws which dictate to you where, and next to whom, you shall walk, sit, stand and lie... This whole abominable nauseating business of toilets and "separate but equal facilities"... What is one to do anyway? One is forever in a trap from which there is no escape... I was no longer trembling and hesitant. I took a blank sheet of paper from my desk, and I scribbled my formal letter of resignation. Until then I had only given verbal notice. I decided to write the letter in my own handwriting instead of typing it. My hand just glided over the sheet. I looked at the letter just before I put it into the envelope. I remembered the resignation note I had once written, after so many false starts, wavering, uncertain, and compared it to that final one. My handwriting had never looked so beautiful. I had at last decided to free myself of the shackles which had bound not only my hands, but also my soul (1975:190).

Finally, Muriel rids herself of the guilt of having collaborated in her own enslavement. She does not wait for her freedom to be given to her – she takes it. In so doing she triumphs over the intensions of the apartheid system; she refuses to have her life marginalized and she takes her fate into her own hands. Muriel's self-awareness is a triumph for her human dignity because she finally determines to define herself rather than be defined by other forces. This type of ending in the novel is a reflection of black consciousness thought. Black consciousness teaches that blacks, in order to rid themselves of the shackles of apartheid, must of necessity, first begin to be inward-looking rather than aspire to be integrated into white society.

Black Consciousness, therefore, can be said to have its roots in the black intellectuals' desire to rid themselves of white liberal tendencies. In explaining the causal forces of black consciousness Thernba Sono writes: The three social forces (i.e. white political liberalism, Afro-American Black Power, and apartheid thematically, rather than chronologically, contribute the quiescence of the causal principle of black consciousness (Source unknown).

What became apparent to black intellectuals in the Black Consciousness movement was that they should take charge of their own destiny and not allow white liberals to continue to act as spokespersons for them. According to black consciousness adherents, white liberals' paternalistic efforts had dismally failed because they did not effect any change in the South African way of life as determined by the white supremacist National Party. Association with white liberals was, therefore, a hindrance towards the realization of the black person's freedom. So they began to mistrust white liberals' intentions and involvement in what is, anyway, essentially a black person's fight.

Cooper (1992) notes that liberalism never addressed itself to the need for fundamental and radical transformation of the society – if it did it would not have been liberalism. It was in the South African context an elitist ideology devoted to the power of hope and the virtues of gradualism. Thus historically there was no real mutual trust between Africans and whites in political terms. She quotes Ngubane as having observed that: South African nationalists took the line that the moment to distrust the white man was when he stretched out his hand in friendship. They agreed that they could collaborate with him on specific issues, but they did not identify themselves with him. They feared that he would either betray them to his government or would be unwilling to bear the suffering that has always been part of the African's fight against white supremacy (1992:43).

The focal point of departure for these black consciousness adherents was to acknowledge the uselessness of association with white liberals and to resuscitate the almost dead fighting spirit of the black person, and to correct the apartheid-created misconception of black as inferior and white as superior; to instil a sense of self-worth and self-awareness in the black person. Black Consciousness realised that it was crucial to begin with the rebuilding and the development of the self in the black man. Because only when the black person has reached a point of accepting himself as worthy and important can the struggle for external acquisitions such as political, social and economic rights begin to be fought and won. The psychic, Mel Berman, explains the importance of the self thus: When people are more secure in their sense of self, they will learn to relate out of want instead of need... There should be a development of consciousness of the self regardless of external influences for they will always be there – but they should not be allowed to invade on the progress of the self for its development and realization... An awareness of external forces that influence or try to shape it should just remain as forces or entities in themselves for to do so would restrict the self to a background position (1990:8).

According to the black consciousness movement, if the black person became proud and positively self-aware of himself, then all other struggles become secondary and comparatively easy to engage. The lack of self-awareness and the shameful display of an acceptance by black people of their inferiority is epitomised by Adam in *Muriel at Metropolitan*. He is portrayed as a man who has resigned himself to his fate as determined by the architects of the apartheid system. This is demonstrated when Adam goes into the toilet and does not close the door. Muriel asks:

"Adam, why did you go into that toilet without bothering even to shut the door?"

"I have to hurry back and watch the door, don't I." If anything gets stolen I am always to blame. They take it out of my pay."

"But why did you not shut the door, Adam? The ladies... everybody could hear"

He answered unconcerned, "What ladies? Do not care about them.

This is not their shop. It's Mr Bloch's shop. Do you think I am as scared of them as you are? And he added bitterly, "I am not supposed to go out, so I use their toilet and I don't care!"

Adam's argument is based on the dependency syndrome – if a person is made to be economically dependent on his employer and the more his employer makes him dependent on his salary, the easier it is to extract maximum labour from him without resistance. Geschwender, in a study of black Americans, observes:

The capitalist exploitation or class model appears to have more potential utility than either the assimilation or white racism perspective. There is general agreement among scholars sharing this perspective that capitalism is the basic source of the oppression of black Americans. Capitalism is a system of production for profit that requires people to be proletarianized – that is, they must be divested of all resources except their labour power, which must be transformed into a marketable commodity (1978:133).

This capitalist "principle", in the South African sense, was extended to include the stripping of the black person of his self-worth, dignity and self respect. The white people, as they consolidated their power through brutally repressive laws, exploitation and ideas of white supremacy, began to really believe that God meant them to be superior to blacks. So they treated black people as sub-human creatures. An example of a black man expressing a lost sense of self-respect is evident in *Muriel at Metropolitan* when Muriel says to Adam:

It was no use trying to speak to him. The long painful years of contact with the whites had developed within him a hard protective core of indifference to all their constant abusive reprimands. He was dead inside; I thought (1975:106)

Another example of this type of attitude in terms of complex and self-worth can be found in Douglas' observation of Adam. Douglas' had resigned his position at Metropolitan Radio because he felt he was being exploited. The following is an extract of a conversation between Muriel and Douglas when he had paid a visit to his former place of employment.

Up to now Adam had avoided coming over to us. He had only been casting casual glances at us and smiling. Douglas now jerked a finger at him and said contemptuously, "For him as well as Agrippa, this is home. Adam will only leave here when he's a corpse. Where can he go to? He is a "foreign native", a Rhodesian. He has to remain tied to Mr Block for the rest of his life like a slave; he has been sold to him and may not leave him for another master. At least I'm free (1975:146).

Douglas, by withholding his labour and refusing to be exploited, frees himself. He extricates himself from a situation where blacks are insultingly addressed or referred to as animals. Here are a few examples. Mrs Kuhn in reference to black colleagues: "I can't stand those voices! Those baboons there, sitting there talking." (1975:68)

Mr Block addressing John Nsiza when handing him his pay envelope:

"There you are Chimp. Msiza was nicknamed John the Chimp by the white staff..." (1987:114)

I have pointed out earlier on that black consciousness was about the resuscitation of the black man's pride in himself and the subsequent engagement with and of the white minority to change their evil ways. Protest fiction, as a tool of engagement and a medium of conscientizing black people, succeed in achieving these stated objectives. One would argue, therefore, that the lady who comes into Mr Block's store symbolizes the triumph of black consciousness. This is what happens:

Mrs Stein looked through the steel bars into the unusually beautiful face of an African woman, who was taking a receipt book out of her bag.

"What do you want Nanny?"

The African woman did not seem impressed by the white lady's kind manner. She replied bluntly, "Don't call me Nanny, your nanny is looking after your kids at your house" (1975:133).

Had Steve Biko been in that shop, he would undoubtedly have applauded? However, he would almost certainly have admonished Adam, Aggripa and other blacks in the shop that the struggle for black liberation cannot be won by individual heroic acts. The black man's suffering was not an individual experience – it was a people's experience, and therefore black people should act together to eradicate a common scourge – Apartheid. This was perhaps the reason protest fiction sought to consolidate the idea of oneness among blacks. Mthobeni Mutoatse defines protest literature thus:

This Participatory Literature of Liberation demands more than just listening to a reading a book or poem, it demands the absolute involvement of the reader/listener all the time, so that in the end the thin line dividing artist from audience disappears, since ours is a culture that does not isolate in us the experience of any facet of our lives, be it birth of death. All those activities involve the whole community, just as the birth of every baby is an event in the black community despite the squalor and poverty and oppression we live under (1987:6).

What emerges here is the idea of community and oneness, the idea of shared experiences in the black community and consolidating those experiences by avoiding individualism. We then have protest fiction as a literature "of the people, by the people, for the people." Tlali is hitherto acting as a spokesperson and representative of the silent majority, no small feat for a black woman! Tlali thus uses her art as a tool – an instrument of the struggle. It must be pointed out here that she does this deliberately and unavoidably because, in any case, the art of writing is relative to particular writers and largely determined by the circumstances within which the writer operates. Jane Watts, in Clayton's Women and Writing in South Africa, puts this perspective on literary projection thus:

Since all South African writes of any significance, by the very nature of their existence, are compelled to draw in some way upon racial tensions in almost all their writings, they inevitably at some point have to include characters from other racial groups. The unavoidable consequence of course, is that these characters are perforce stereotypes. Nadime Gordiner recognizes this in a 1973 footnote in an article written originally in 1969: I now believe Georg Lukacs is right when he says that a writer, in imaginative creation and intuition that comes with it, cannot go beyond the potential of his own experiences... There are some aspects of a black man's life that have been put impossibly beyond the white man's potential experience, and the same applies to the black man and some aspects of the white man's experience (1989:11)

4. In Closing

This is probably the reason why South African literature, and most notably protest fiction, assumes the form it does. Protest fiction is, therefore, a record and a contribution of the struggle against white domination, exploitation and oppression. In the process of mirroring reality, the black writer presents it as it is. The history of protest fiction is largely determined by the historical conditions which prevailed in South Africa. Though largely determined by its historical context, protest fiction writing is not a spontaneous activity; it is deliberate activity which reacted against the brutally oppressive Apartheid state. Shava contends that:

Black South African literature is a literature of protest. It protests against social, political, and economic arrangements which deprive black people of civil rights and free expression of their aspirations. As a result, this literature has tended to be overwhelmingly political and proletarian in outlook, and concerned with the problem of colour and class. This preoccupation with politics makes it incumbent upon black South African writers to address themselves to the subject in a manner that reveals commitment. In the South African context commitment is calculated to inculcate political

understanding and to promote change. (1989:5)

It is therefore pivotal to examine Tlali's novel as a literary work that propagates and espouse Black Consciousness ideology and as a genre within a given geographical and historical context. It is therefore difficult or irrelevant to examine this literature using American or Eurocentric paradigms. Shava continues to observe that;

The idea of post-colonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing. European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of 'the universal'. Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing. (1989:11)

Muriel at Metropolitan is a novel that unashamedly serves as a historical record and a unique form of literary aestheticism. It also constitutes literary resistance to Apartheid and to the South African patriarchal culture. Cullhed states that this novel was produced 'a time when black men and women needed to unite in their struggle against Apartheid...and that it professed to raise the level of awareness among the oppressed'. (2006:58) It is noted here that Tlali's novel illustrates the drudgery for African women. The novel can be regarded as an artistic work of self-affirmation.

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