

NARRATIVES OF ROOTS
AND ROUTES: NIQ
MHLONGO'S NOVELS
AND A CELEBRATION OF
S O W E T O



Photo by Hugh Mclalose

By Sandile Ngidi

Soweto holds a pretty special and imaginatively spatial place in young South African novelist Niq Mhlongo (born in 1973). In his two novels, *Dog Eat Dog* (2004) and *After Tears* (2007), both published by Kwela Books, Mhlongo captures the spirit and risqué rhythm of life lived to the fullest and foulest in a modern-day Soweto. It's no ordinary life but one lived at the cusp of political transition, HIV/Aids, gruelling poverty and unemployment. The Soweto of Niq Mhlongo's novels is integral to a South Africa that is "very much in the hands of international capital", to use the words of

George Soros. In this Soweto (to stretch the point perhaps) even a dog is not spared the hardships. Instead, to survive in this brutal jungle, a dog has to eat another as the fangs of globalisation bite unflinchingly at humans and hounds alike.

In *After Tears*, Mhlongo's second novel, protest placards read:

ANTI-PRIVATISATION FORUM (AFP)
SOWETO ELECTRICITY CRISIS COMMITTEE
HIV/AIDS+PREPAID = DEATH RATE

"Water is life, comrades! We used to pay

cheaper flat rates for water and electricity during apartheid. Why do we have to have this expensive prepaid with a black ANC government? Why are we, the poor people, discriminated against by our own government?" (*After Tears*: 157).¹

"The revolution will not be televised, Advo. Do you realise that there's no water or electricity in most of Chi, including at our house?" says an affable character called Zero (AT:155-156).

These outbursts of discontent carry the same tone of Soweto political activist Trevor Ngwane's words in 2001 at the Porto Alegre's World Social Forum, an antithesis of the annual Davos World Economic Forum. In the preface to Patrick Bond's book, *Against Global Apartheid*, Ngwane is quoted to have said, "I come from South Africa. We still had a hope that liberation would bring houses, jobs and good education for our people. But since our government got closer to the World Bank and people like George Soros, we have lost a million jobs."

Even in the midst of the HIV/Aids pandemic, sexual habits and attitudes remain locked backward and risky. For Vusi (in *Dog Eat Dog*) in every woman's buttocks lurks the promise of his sexual Jerusalem. While his friends warn him of a possible "electrocution", he retorts by saying that "I don't think those chicks have Aids, man. They are still new in the game" (DED: 85)². Zero, the taxi driver in *After Tears*, has similar traits and in his harem of girlfriends is one he calls "Bunjubunju, my Venus, my goddess of sexual beauty and love" (AT: 47). Even more tragic in the same narrative is the fate of Yuri, the main character's ten-year-old cousin whose mother, Aunt Thandi, died of Aids-related diseases at the age of twenty-seven" (AT: 21). This innocent boy is the

conscience in the novel's desire to warn about the devastation of Aids in a liberated South Africa.

In Mhlongo's *Soweto*, attitudes towards women remain backward as the garrulous Zero illustrates in *After Tears*: "But you see Advo, these ladies nowadays have a way of challenging us men. You'll be surprised at what we taxi drivers see in our taxis every day. Some of them don't even bother to wear panties at all. Some of them wear revealing miniskirts just to challenge you, man. That's why Avalon Cemetery is full, it's because these ladies are living advertisements for Aids. I tell you, Advo" (AT: 48).

Mhlongo's fiction may at times appear as if it deliberately conspires to be imitated by real life in its foretelling of the future: In March this year a young Soweto woman, Nwabisa Ngcukana, was molested by taxi drivers at the Noord taxi rank in inner-city Johannesburg, allegedly because the culprits objected to her revealing miniskirt known as *isigcebhe* in Gauteng township parlance. The incident incensed human rights activists from various walks of life and led to two protest marches, one led by talk-show host Redi Direko of Radio 702.

Unperturbed by sarcasm when Zero asks for one of his female passengers' name, she is intellectually on top:

"Syphilis" but he thinks she said Phyllis. She says: "I live in Aids View." (AT: 51)

Mhlongo's two novels provide what is arguably the most eloquent and racy portrayal of life, through imaginative writing of latter-day Soweto and her people. The novelist is telling his readers: forget the tourist's and the mainstream media's tall tales about this world-famous township, my larger-than-life characters will show you the

¹ All subsequent references to *After Tears* are abbreviated AT.

² All subsequent references to *Dog Eat Dog* are abbreviated DED.

real deal about life in Soweto – *nine nine!* Unlike James Baldwin who said to a French interviewer in 1974, “I never had a childhood”, Niq Mhlongo affirms his childhood and recreates it with a great sense of pride and fond memories.

Before expanding on the theme, it is perhaps useful to understand some key pointers of the interconnectedness of Mhlongo's literary work and biographical aspects of his life. Like *After Tears*, Bafana, the author “wanted to be a lawyer” and unsuccessfully studied law at both the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town. Dingamanzi, the main character in *Dog Eat Dog*, is not only a Njomane, the clan name of the Mhlongos, but faces the same problems when trying to enroll at Wits University. In an interview for this journal Niq Mhlongo said that he did not know what to study and was so poor that he had to work in the university's bar in the evenings to support himself at university. The narrative of the main character's socioeconomic condition is also embodied in the symbolic meaning of the name Dingamanzi. In Zulu (Mhlongo's native language), the name refers to someone so wretched that he/she does not even have access to water.

Sardonically Mhlongo has this to say about his becoming a writer: “I would say that perhaps writing chose me at the time when I was struggling with my law degree. I think therefore that my failure to become a lawyer influenced me to write, although I come from a family that loves literature.”

Back to the theme of this essay, my contention is that Mhlongo's bold and colourful prose speaks to the politics of negotiating a hopeful sense of “home” and “belonging”. He desires to portray township

life with an authentically young and restless *kasi* beat that sings of Soweto (despite the hardships) as a splendid playground of his boyhood dreams, trials and triumphs. He signposts his times with iconic music idols like Mdu and Boom Shaka whose township hit songs resonate with the characters that people his novels from the “world” he knows so well – Soweto! These artists were also at the helm of a youth-driven urban cultural revolution in the early 90s, the era that saw Nelson Mandela's release after spending 27 years on Robben Island.

Although in no ways an effort in the writing of “protest literature,” in *Dog Eat Dog*, Mhlongo does not forget *Umshini Wami*, the erstwhile revolutionary song about the machine gun. The song helped catapult Jacob Zuma to the presidency of the country's ruling ANC in 2007. In this novel which occurs against the backdrop of the 1994 general elections, the first ever to be democratic and non-racial in South Africa, the novelist indulges in the colourful stuff that matters to ordinary folks on the eve of casting the ballot for the first time. Although he is not writing to sing praises about political figures, and coat their slogans with meat loaves and cheese, Mhlongo is sensitive to every nuance of the political milieu in which his characters live. On the day of the elections, the main character wakes up at 5 am at no one's prodding although he is not an early riser. “...that morning I didn't need Dunga to wake me, I was too excited about voting for the first time” (DED: 53).

Niq Mhlongo recreates the texture and the canvass on which to paint the lives and times of his characters in Soweto and Johannesburg. His is an ambition to temporarily suspend belief about the socioeconomic strife in his midst through the

wit and mischief of his characters and the sometimes dare-devil attitude of surviving township angst at all costs. In the main he uses the youthful gaze which allows him to assume an authentic and credible voice as a vehicle for his narratives.

For both Dingamanzi and Bafana, the principal narrators of *Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears* respectively, Soweto (and in the case of *Dog Eat Dog*, Braamfontein as well), is a vibrant theatre in which these narrators' young and troubled, yet promising lives in a "new" South Africa, are performed. Soweto is the grand amphitheatre in which the revolution's victories and failures televise themselves with the cadence and stamina of a *kwasa-kwasa* dancer from Congo, a country appropriately known as the land of a thousand dances. Like a latter-day Amilcar Cabral, through his novels, Mhlongo cautions against telling lies and claiming "easy victories". He says his people, the multitudes of Soweto, deserve better.

Equally important is that in Mhlongo's novels, Soweto is the space through which he attempts to deal with the intricacies of identity politics or what Therese Steffen, author of *Crossing Color. Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction, Drama*, calls "questions concerning roots and routes". Although the future looks uncertain for his two main protagonists in *Dog Eat Dog* and *After Tears* respectively, both are not politically naïve.

Although this essay puts the spotlight on Soweto as the place from which Mhlongo tells his stories, there is nevertheless an appreciation of the equally important role the city of Johannesburg plays in the author's reference point. Equally significant is the author's sense of urgency for the city as space that must be liberated, yet he also

realises the falsehoods that this space creates.

During a writer's fellowship address (unpublished) at the University of Iowa in August 2008, Mhlongo said that "the power of the gleam of the city" had been a major contributor to his choice of setting for his two novels; they had to resonate with the pace and pulse that often characterise the gutter and the glitter of the urban space. He is particularly fascinated by "the city's ability to lure people into believing that it can fulfil their egos, and their empty quests for the life of comfort, convenience, pleasure and fortune." Through his novels, the author does not enter the city to "salute" it, as Mongane Serote's classic poem, "City Johannesburg" suggests with cutting irony. Instead he enters Johannesburg to partake in the national and individual acts of defiance against the city's authority and racially restrictive machinations.

The city is no holy and terrifying ground but a place in which as a young adult he comes of age, politically and sexually. This is perhaps best illustrated in *Dog Eat Dog*, when Dingamanzi, not only stirs trouble by deliberately taking his girlfriend to his YMCA residency, but continues with his stubborn defiance of authority when subjected to a disciplinary hearing. He is so defiant that he even ridicules the idea of celibacy as epitomised by one of the senior authorities at the YMCA where he is ultimately dismissed for misconduct.

Mhlongo's Dingamanzi spoils the broth with ease since he has no time for sheepish and timid games, as he realises that the apartheid Bastille is about to fall and is ready for great songs that the people shall sing at the rendezvous of victory. Despite the historical poverty and landlessness legacy of

apartheid, Dingamanzi is not a fish whose water has dried up.

On the contrary he is an ideologically radical fish, and deliberately muddies the waters in the belief that after all apartheid has long polluted it; now the noble shark of freedom, Nelson Mandela, will deliver the fresh rivers to all at the hour of freedom.

Dingamanzi is a far cry from Mthuthuzeli Matshoba's fictional male character who has ceased to be a man. He is not the Soweto man of the past who, "by dodging, lying, resisting where it is possible, bolting when I'm already cornered, parting with invaluable money, sometimes calling my sisters into the game to get amorous with my captors, allowing myself to be slapped on the mouth in front of my womenfolk and getting sworn at with my mother's private parts" (Matshoba 1979:18).

In a sense Dingamanzi is shaped by the Soweto that shaped Niq Mhlongo. This is what Mhlongo told me about the Soweto in which he grew up:

I remember playing tennis on the street on weekends while my eldest brother put his music speaker on the veranda and played Don Williams while polishing his shoes for about six hours. I remember my mother teaching me how to make fire on the Welcome Dover Stove everyday at 6 a.m. Back then, there were also banana and ice cream cars that would be honking on the street, and we would exchange the empty bottles for cash to buy the bananas and ice cream.

There were also the coal trucks that passed on the street selling bags of coal and we would run after them to try and get a free ride while the driver was not looking. I also remember that there were only two families with a television set on our street. So I

befriended a boy whose house had a television set so that I could be allowed to go to his house and watch *The A-Team* TV drama series, *Mopheme* (a Sotho drama series) as well as the dancing programme called *Lapologa* (our SABC 1's *Jika Majika* then).

I also had a cousin who was a referee for the then National Soccer League, and he would take me to George Goch, Orlando and Ellis Park stadiums to watch soccer. My eldest brother also worked as a ticket examiner at the Chiawelo train station, so he would organise tickets for me and my friend to go and watch movies at Apsara Cinema in Lenasia, south of Soweto.

He also recalled:

sitting at home for almost the whole year without going to school in 1991. This happened when former President Mandela was released from Robben Island. I had failed matric and had to repeat it the following year. As an adult I remember the unemployment days with my matric certificate. We would look for every piece of metal that we would sell at the Midway scrap yard just to have money to take a train to the Lenasia Library. I remember relocating to Vilakazi Street in Orlando West with my brother Elvis who was a teacher in a school in town.

On the other hand, in his introduction to his classic short story collection, *Call Me Not a Man*, Mthuthuzeli Matshoba has this to say about Soweto, a place of his birth:

I was born in 1950 in the early Soweto of Orlando (east and West), Shantytown, White City Jabavu, Pimville and Moroka, the sprawling dirt-and vice-polluted giant matchbox city, was more or less my age when my environment began to register in my consciousness. It was in Orlando East, in the

three-roomed house of an aunt with a family of six, that I spent the first four years of my life. I 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. They had not yet found a house of their own, were still on the everlasting waiting list, maybe.”

Niq Mhlongo's Sowetans are “black rebels” who are “detrified” and “urbanised” as Ezekiel (now Es'kia) Mphahlele put it in his review of Nadine Gordimer's second novel, *A World of Strangers* (Mphahlele:147).

In *Dog Eat Dog*, a day after he has had a quarrel with his wife, Dingamazi's father returns home from work “sober”. To Dingamazi's surprise, his father invites him to come with him to the local drinking hole where the young boy tastes his first beer courtesy of his father. “When we came back home I was his backing vocalist. I was drunk, but my mother was happy and never complained when he took me with him. It was clear that if he took me with him he was enjoying drinking at the bottlestore and not seeing other women” (DED: 40).

In this episode Mhlongo redefines the initiation paradigms and allows a young boy to be introduced to the world of alcohol and the unwritten compromises struck by adults in the midst of adultery and a fading romance.

I began to think about our lives in Soweto in those days. At midnight every Tuesday and Friday the white policemen would knock rudely on our kitchen and sitting-dining-room doors. Without search warrants, they would rummage through our house for so-called illegal immigrants from the homelands and any other illegal stuff such as homemade *ntankunyisa* beer. After opening the doors, they would count us in their attempt to control the African birth rate, or influx from rural areas, or whatever the reason was (DED: 40).

In conclusion, Niq Mhlongo must be commended for infusing a fresh, mischievously charming and youthful energy into the narratives of the urban black experience in South Africa today. His rough sketches of Soweto are vivid and a powerful statement of the endurance and grit of its people amidst all odds. Mhlongo's novels are semi-autobiographical tales about a township boy's ongoing search for place, space and belonging in a South Africa full of promise and the betrayal of hope in equal measure almost.

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