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Not Yet Uhuru: Aspects of Social Realism in Vonani Bila's Selected Poetry

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Moffat Sebola
University of Limpopo
School of Languages and Communication Studies
Department of Languages
Email: moffat.sebola@ul.ac.za
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0903-283X

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Olufemi J. Abodunrin
University of Limpopo
School of Languages and Communication Studies
Department of Languages
Email: Olufemi.abodunrin@ul.ac.za
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4841-8724
**Corresponding author*

Abstract

This article analyses Vonani Bila's selected poetry for its ability to produce an 'air of reality'. The central argument of the article is that Bila embraces an aesthetic of realism, which essentially values unsparing, accurate and sordid representations of the psychological, social and material realities of postcolonial (and democratic) South Africa. Undergirded by the Marxist theory of Social Realism, the qualitative approach and descriptive design, this article purposively

selected ten poems from some of the anthologies in which Bila published his poetry, namely; *Magicstan Fires*, *Handsome Jita* and *Sweep of the Violin*. Bila's poetry can best be situated within the historical contexts that shape his texts, namely; the apartheid era, ideas about capitalism in newly democratic South Africa, the emergence of a vibrant immigrant community in South Africa and idealised notions of achieving equality and prosperity through education in South Africa. This article is mainly a critical analysis, and not a historical account of the apartheid era and democratic dispensation of South Africa. In the analysis, it was noted that Bila's poetry generally manifests the literary categories of social and psychological realism, respectively. As a social realist, Bila explores the problems of economic inequality and captures the experience of both rural and urban life in a post- and neo-colonial context of South Africa. As a psychological realist, on the other extreme, Bila is concerned with delving beneath the surface of social life to probe the complex motivations and (un)conscious desires that shape his literary personae's perceptions. The article concludes with the notion that, in his commitment to document the realities of everyday life in South Africa, both at social and psychological dimensions, Bila offers a penetrating insight into the repression, alienation, marginalisation, instabilities, and inequalities that structure post- and neo-colonial South Africa.

Keywords: *Realism, Poetry, Inequality, Disillusionment, Despair, Neo-colonialism*

Introduction

This article critically examines a selection of Vonani Bila's poems in some of his poetry anthologies, *Magicstan Fires* (2006), *Handsome Jita* (2007) and contributions to *Sweep of the Violin* (Mkuti and Nkealah, 2017). Vonani Bila is a South African poet, musician, creative-writing coach and editor, among other designations. Apart from being instrumental in getting the works of marginalised poets into circulation and being a nurturing inspiration for budding poets, Bila has published volumes of his own poetry works and has performed his poetry in Belgium, Sweden, Holland, France, Portugal, Germany, Ghana, Brazil, Finland, Algeria and Indonesia (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:19). Bila's poems are selected for analysis particularly in the context of the political developments and attendant social realities of democratic South Africa. It will be shown that Bila's poetry highlights the lingering effects of colonialism and apartheid, among which are the dehumanisation, discrimination and marginalisation of Africans as well as the inabilities of the democratic government of South Africa to fulfil the promises made by African political leaders to the masses from 1994 to date. Although the historical

contexts, i.e. apartheid era to the democratic dispensation in South Africa, largely inform Bila's poetry and are borne in mind in the analysis of the selected poems, this article, however, is not a historical account of those contexts. Instead, the article is mainly a critical analysis of Bila's poetry. This article further highlights the relevance of Bila's poetry in terms of its depictions of political and social realities obtaining on the various strands of South African society and its role in determining the direction South Africa should take. An examination of Bila's thematic preoccupations will reveal that he devotes most of the space to the injustices, dehumanisation, bestialisation, bastardisation, despair, alienation and disillusionment of the Black population in subaltern spheres of South Africa. Undergirding the perpetuation of these maladies, as later shown in the analysis, are the neo-colonial practices of political leaders, in whom the marginalised peoples of South Africa vested their confidence for redemption and restoration after the apartheid era. In tandem with this, it will be shown that Bila's poetry further reveals that both the political and social terrains in South Africa have never been stable. However, prior to that, it is imperative to discuss the theoretical framework and methodological aspects of this article, respectively.

Theoretical Grounding

This article was undergirded by the Marxist theory of Social Realism, which Selden (1985:25) regards as "Soviet Socialist Realism". The Marxist theory of Social Realism was postulated by the German sociologist and philosopher, Karl Marx. This theory's fundamental emphasis is that a work of art of any period achieves the quality of *narodnost* ('popularity') by expressing a high level of social awareness, revealing a sense of the true social conditions and feelings of a particular epoch. Social Realism also purports that such a work of art will also possess a 'progressive' outlook, glimpsing the developments of the future in the lineaments of the present, and giving a sense of the ideal possibilities of social development from the point of view of the society. The theory essentially focuses on the fundamental values and basic practices as well as concerns related to society (Ahmed, 2021).

According to Ahmed (2021), this theory is not only restricted to the analysis of artistic forms of literature, but also effectively addresses the social composure and incidents that become the reason for people's art and literature. Put succinctly, the theory principally addresses composure

of the society where the subjects are human beings. Furthermore, this theory purports that the society as a whole is an obvious as well as a furtive composition of its inhabitants. Social Realism, furthermore, buttresses the Marxist concept of practical transformation all around the world. It looks into the social and political complications that pave the way towards the literature and art of the society. Similarly, the South African poet, Vonani Bila, evokes the same concept of political and social transformation and a radical denial of any imposed hegemony in his poetry. Bila theorises the notions of human equality, the struggle against cruel and corrupt political leadership as well as the need for the provision of justice for everyone in his poetic oeuvre. In this way, his poetry typifies the necessity of political, economic and social change in South Africa. In essence, Social Realism holds that every reality is directly connected to the society and that literature cannot be separated from the social trends. Therefore, the Marxist theory of Social Realism has been employed in order to illustrate the significance of social reality in (postcolonial) South Africa from the selected poetry of Vonani Bila. The theory was suitable to this study because Bila's poetry largely highlights and thematises those areas (i.e. political, economic, social aspects), which play a notable role in the formation of any society. Bila discusses the sordid conditions in which lower and middle class live as diametrically opposed to the crass materialism of the upper class in South African society.

Methodology

This article adopted the qualitative research approach and the descriptive design to critically analyse ten purposively selected poems from some of the anthologies in which Vonani Bila published his poetry, viz.: *Magicstan Fires* (2006), *Handsome Jita* (2007) and *Sweep of the Violin* (Mkuti and Nkealah, 2017). The qualitative research approach (interpretivism) was adopted because it strives to holistically understand human experience in specific settings, and as an interdisciplinary field, it encompasses a wider range of epistemological viewpoints and interpretive techniques of understanding human experiences (Queirós et al., 2017; Chivanga and Monyai, 2021). Also, the scope of qualitative analysis covers a spectrum from *descriptive* through to more interrogative, theorised, *interpretative* analysis, which helps to facilitate some understanding of Bila's thematic inclinations (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2013). Since the poems were analysed in light of a predetermined set of themes, namely; the dehumanisation of

Blacks, dreams deferred, despair and disillusionment, the Thematic Analysis technique was deemed suitable by the authors. The Thematic Analysis method was preferred, not only because it is a flexible foundational method to qualitative data analysis, but also because it afforded the authors the leeway to identify themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to Bila's poetry (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The next section is devoted to the analysis of Bila's poetry in light of the aforementioned themes.

Bila's Thematic Inflections of 'Not Yet Uhuru' for Blacks in South Africa

The protraction of colonial tendencies in postcolonial South Africa is evinced by the raw, realistic and definitive perceptions of and commentaries on the literary setting of South Africa by its subaltern voices. In these perceptions and commentaries, poets like Bila thematically inflect the ill-treatment of Blacks by both White and Black masters. Blacks' ill-treatment by the former is notable in the poem, "Horrors of Phalaborwa" (Bila, 2007:17). In the poem, Bila incisively narrates the story of an impecunious farmworker, Nelson Chisale, who was literally thrown to the lions by the White farmer, Mark Scott-Crossley and two other farmworkers in 2004. According to the poet, Chisale

> did not come to steal
> or make demands
> did not wield a panga
> or axe
> he did not come to scheme to strangle
> or suffocate the settler
> he did not plan to slice off
> the farmer's genitals
> he did not have a gun
> or the intention
> to blast the white man's skull
> to smithereens

Blatantly put, Chisale did not come to Scott-Crossley's farm with nefarious intentions against the farmer. As the poet elucidates, Chisale did not even have a sense of entitlement to the farmer's land, he merely wanted "to collect his much valued possessions – clothes and pots" (Bila,

2007:17). With this disclosure, the poet intends to show that Chisale did not deserve to be thrown into the den of lions. It is as if the poet sought reasons to justify the farmer's actions but could not find any, all of which was meant to lead to the logical conclusion that the farmer had Chisale mauled by the lions simply because in his mind, Black people deserve to be devalued and dehumanised. A different conversation would perhaps be struck had Scott-Crossley did the same with fellow White people's lives. It is also important for the poet to highlight the disproportionate possessions that both Scott-Crossley and Chisale had. The poet intended to highlight that even after attaining freedom, Blacks still struggled to supplement a meagre family income. As a result, they still relied on the colonialists for jobs.

The poet also aims to show that South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy only saw the Whites' surrender of political power, and not economic power and land redistribution. Bila is bothered by the fact that even after decades of democracy, native South Africans in the likes of Nelson Chisale were still landless and impoverished; wealth was still in the hands of the oppressors. It is probably because of this disparity that Scott-Crossley still considered himself superior to Blacks such as Chisale. Emanating from this superiority complex was also the perception of Blacks as nothing but bestial beings merely existing for the perpetuation of White people's economic lordship. It appears Scott-Crossley perceived Blacks as not only an inferior race to his, but also as a people whose lives had no inherent value. Chisale was fed to the lions, and with this, one would envisage that the justice system of the land where Blacks are said to be 'free' from colonial and racist maladies, the value of (Black) life would be reaffirmed and the murderer punished for this inhumane act. Although Crossley was initially sentenced to death, the sentence was later reduced to five years on the premise that "prosecution had failed to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Chisale was still alive when he was fed to the lions" (https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2016-12-23-the-life-of-mark--scott-crossley-the-man-who-was-involved-in-a-horrific-crime-in-which-nelson-chisale-was-thrown-into-a-lions-den/). The judgment was not based on the knowledge that a man had been fed to the lions, but on whether he was alive or dead when the act was committed. Even the poet does not know whether Chisale was alive or dead when he was thrown to the lions, "only the farmer and the spirits can tell" (Bila 2007, 18). In African culture, it would not make any difference whether Chisale was alive or dead when he was mauled by the lions because to Africans, a

human being is still valuable, dead or alive. In his writings, Es'kia Mphahlele foregrounds his philosophised trope of African Humanism and bolsters this view as significant among Africans (see Rafapa 2005).

To the poet, Blacks are still viewed and treated in bestial terms by their (former) colonisers. The justice system also seems unprepared to transform the terrain by serving justice to Blacks against Whites. The poet proceeds to a lucid description of the scene prior to the ultimate execution of Nelson Chisale:

> we are told
> for more than seven hours
> the farmer gulped whisky and wine
> gunned down sumptuous supper
> head twirled in murderous delight
> a black body tied to a tree
> hungry and weak

In highlighting the dehumanisation of Blacks, the poet also sheds light on how the farmer took delight in treating Chisale like an animal. With this scene, the poet sets out to show that colonialists had to first be dehumanised themselves before they could dehumanise Africans. Scott-Crossley's behaviour and attitude, as described in the stanza above, goes against the Pan-Africanist trope of Ubuntu, which essentially foregrounds the primacy of personhood and dignity of human life. To Scott-Crossley, Black lives did not matter; he could still gun down sumptuous supper in murderous delight, with no concern whatsoever for the Black body that was tied to a tree. After gunning down his sumptuous supper, the poet reveals that

> one by one, they battered him
> his dripping necklace
> made them do
> an effervescent jive
> and when he wept and moaned
> they cut open his flesh
> fed their hunger with blood
> drank from his flowing wounds
> then loaded him into the back of a bakkie
> and drove more than 30 kms to hoedspruit

What is even more appalling is the 'normalcy', on the part of the farmer and his cohorts, that characterised the savagery that Chisale suffered

prior to being thrown to the lions. It seems the perpetrators took delight in torturing him. In this lucid description of how Chisale died and was denied justice, the poet hints at the idea that, to Black people, this is a 'normal' way of life; it is just "another farmworker murdered" (Bila 2007, 18). It is as if the poet is saying, 'it is not a big deal; it is just another Black farmworker who died. Life should go on like nothing happened'. Considering the justice system's treatment of the whole case, it seems that way.

The poet not only comments on the conditions in which South African Black people live even after democracy, but also shows the devaluation of the personhood, freedom and dignity of Black people. The poet's central thesis is, 'apartheid is still alive and well'. Black people are depicted in the poem as still bearing the brunt of burying their own who are killed by racist White farmers, that is, of course, if the lions leave anything to be buried, to begin with. The poet is devastated that Scott-Crossley did not receive the punishment he deserved, hence:

> i close my eyes
> wipe tears of dismay
> so many things undone
> i drown under the weight of pain
> i share the fury of this agonised world
> i can only shout
> 'lock the savage in a cold cell for life!'

The poet is further overwhelmed by a sense of despondency when he realises that Chisale's case was handled unfairly, possibly because "the rich" stood "in the way of justice" (Bila 2007, 18-19). As if to show how Scott-Crossley's deeds were dismissed by some, the poet also alludes to the different opinions that emerged on his personality:

> some say scott-crossley was a god-fearing man
> a man with a tender heart
> some saw him kiss
> his new wife
> splendidly
> before judge maluleke

In light of these character witnesses' remarks about Scott-Crossley, the poet finds it befitting to raise the question: "what god-fearing man throws his brother to the lions?" (Bila, 2007: 19). A response to this question could be multi-fold, or even necessitate endless hypotheses.

However, the poet's implicit responses to the question could be: (a) These 'positive' testimonials are nothing but pure hogwash intended to dismiss the gravity of Scott-Crossley's inhumane deed and have him go un-unpunished, (b) It is impossible that Scott-Crossley perceived Nelson Chisale as his brother, because, for that to happen, Scott-Crossley had to consider Chisale as his equal in all aspects of human life, and (c) The fear of God/god cannot be brought into the equation unless that God/god endorses the dehumanisation and murder of Black people by White people, and (d) Just because a man is seen kissing his wife splendidly does not mean he cannot throw another man into the den of lions, let alone reference public displays of affection as a premise to validate a man's innocence. Nevertheless, the poet is both delighted and elated that, against the character witnesses' attempts to speak highly and kindly about Scott-Crossley, probably to effect a lighter sentence or no sentence at all, Scott-Crossley was imprisoned.

The poet believes Scott-Crossley's barbaric acts against Chisale emanated from an inability to accept that apartheid was dismantled, at least politically and still lived like nothing had changed in terms of the inferiorisation and maltreatment of Blacks by Whites. Furthermore, the poet believes that there are numerous White farmers who still treat Blacks the same way Scott-Crossley treated Nelson Chisale. The poet believes racism, as deeply embedded in the likes of Scott-Crossley, is beyond healing. The incurability of the racial disease is exacerbated by the carriers' desire and devotion to multiply it against those they perceive as racially inferior to them. In this sense, racism becomes a trans-generational malady. The incurability of racism, particularly some White people's inferiorisation and dehumanisation of Black people, is also alluded to in the poem, "Apartheid Commando in the Park" (Bila, 2006: 71). The Apartheid Commando is no longer occupying a position of influence in South Africa, but has become a beggar with a "ragged body sprawled on the lawn like a dog". But even in this state, he still mumbles "KAFFIRS ARE KAK" (Black people are 'Shit') (Bila, 2006:71). The poet observed when the Apartheid Commando and his "smelling drunken girlfriend in tattered wear":

Hobbled closer
She hugged & kissed him so madly
Gave him a bottle of liquor
He guzzled the beer
Swearing
Then he picked up his sign

UNEMPLOYED. PLEASE HELP.

The point driven towards here is that, years after the institutional or political demise of apartheid, even in a state of destitution, some White people still deride Black people, albeit in hushed tones. To the poet, nothing really changed except that some of the racists, still holding fast to their doctrine of racial supremacy, are the new vagabonds in the so-called free South Africa. It seems these new vagabonds have no choice but to seek help from some of the people they once despised and still despise, which perhaps is what amplifies their disparagement of Blacks. Thus, to the poet, racism proliferates, irrespective of whether the racists are rich or poor. Compounding the problem in postcolonial South Africa is also the issue of land (re)distribution. Former colonists are not keen to restore the land and wealth to the original owners, essentially because they believe it is 'their fatherland'. But, the "tales of dispossession" are told best by the likes of "Oom Brown" who "fought during the second world war while the boers received tracks of fertile land" (Bila, 2006: 49). Oom Brown only received "an old bicycle" for his service in the war. This infuriates the poet even more:

> greedy souls dance and shit
> on the graves of my ancestors
> settlers kill a black man who lay huddled
> 'we thought it was a baboon'

The poem about Chisale was written eleven years into South Africa's liberation, and the poet lamented that he still did not have a "gracious dream" (Bila, 2007:20). The poet is even pessimistic about the idea of South Africa as a 'rainbow nation' because of the acts of dehumanisation, case in point being Chisale's death. The poem represents the collective bitterness and lamentation of marginalised and dehumanised Blacks who are still referred to in bestial terms by White people. In harmony with the poet, the collective voice of Blacks calls on the "lingering souls of ancestors beneath the red earth […] to wrench free the backs of people hunched at dawn [and] broken at sundown". Put succinctly, the poet proffers that Black people are still not freed from the yoke of slavery and apartheid. There is still a need to "wrench free working hands of underpaid, regimented workers whose sweat earns them shame in their unreturned land" (Bila, 2007: 20). The poet's and the subaltern South Africans' pessimism towards discourses of freedom is notable in the closing lines of the poem, which are worth quoting in full:

eleven years into liberation –
what i can show the world
is a harvest of dust and thorns
eleven years into liberation –
what i can show the world
is the rural poor's share
of the liberation dream-sun –
a broken light
a broken hoe
a broken hope
eleven years into liberation –
one man
throws another man
to the lions –
i can't wait in hope
for sudden change
brothers and sisters
the new south Africa is free decay

The poem ends with a sense of despair and lack of confidence in the mantras of a 'free South Africa' and their attendant discourses of decolonisation in South Africa. For the poet, it is worth repeating that Blacks are not yet free from colonial subjugation, for as long as abnormalities such as throwing another person to the lions still appear normalised. The poem is also consonantal with much of contemporary South African poetry which foregrounds "dashed hopes, betrayal; the visceral and corporeal responses to thwarted life, corrupted relations, smashed love, throes of poverty" (Waller 2007, viii). What Waller aptly captures here are the lingering effects of the apartheid system in the lives of Black people, including Black graduates, as illustrated in the poem, "The Graduate" (Bila, 2007: 31):

Fresh an' fat from
the bush varsity
6 months writin' letters away
I mean cvs
fraise creeps in
I sit back in the corrugated iron house
free the embittered soul with
zol, *spinza*, jazz an' sex
affirmative action so strange
no *msebenzi* in the cattle-market world

the corporate world dictates
gotta no experience (original italics)

It is worth mentioning that the segregation and discrimination experienced by Black people during the apartheid regime was in all spheres of life, be it politics, economic structures, social life and religion. Connected to the segregation and discrimination was violence which, according to Wasosa (2012) assumed three manifestations: physical, psychological and structural. Wasosa (2012) says the administration of physical violence was mainly by State agents such as the police and the army, where force was applied to pacify the Blacks. For the entrenchment of psychological violence, mechanisms were put in place to ensure the total control of Black people, which was mainly through the education system and the church. Structural violence leaned on these mechanisms put by colonial masters to ensure that Blacks did not progress to the level of their White masters in political, social and economic spheres. The education system was also controlled through the bottle neck system that ensured that the number of Blacks declined as the level of education increased. Since education determines one's access to certified skills and jobs, this strategy became a systematic way of eliminating Blacks from better paying jobs (Wasosa, 2012). But then, even with the few Blacks who completed their tertiary studies in this bottle neck system, it was still difficult to secure better paying employment. Beyond apartheid, graduates in democratic South Africa are still going through the bottle neck education system and struggle to secure employment, as the poem cited above elucidates. This situation, for the poet, is yet another dimension of the perpetuation of the colonial system in a 'decolonised' nation.

In the poem, "The Graduate", the poet probes the psychological world of the job-seeking graduate, who after numerous attempts at applying for a job, still fails to secure one. Such graduates' hopes for a better life and future, the majority of whom are the youth, are dashed because the acquisition of tertiary education, which is viewed as one of the means through which they overcome the throes of poverty, seems fruitless in their job-hunting. Although in possession of higher education qualifications, which are supposed to evince the graduates' eligibility for better paying jobs, the graduates are required to also have some form of job experience upon graduation. The poet draws such graduates from the margins to the centre perhaps in an effort to preempt the notion that 'education is the key' for Black graduates living in a nation still ruled by colonists economically. To the poet, education may not always be the

key, particularly if the lock will be changed upon the graduates' completion of tertiary education. Some, if not most of these unemployed youths, eventually fall prey to substances such *zol* (slang for marijuana), *spinza* (Tsotsitaal for 'beer') and (unprotected) sex, according to the poet. With dashed hopes, these youths often resort to crime as a way of combating economic repression. The poem, "Boys from Seshego" is informative on this aspect, particularly in its description of 'boys from Seshego' who

> loiter through polokwane town
> knock at doors of our apartments and offices
> with darting eyes
> you monitor every movement of tenants
> a shit job you have created for yourselves
> a job that only requires
> the ability to shamelessly, carelessly
> instil fear & fever
> in your defenceless victim
> with a sharp blade
> & a coughing metal

These boys, according to the poet, "should be on scaffolds – rebuilding the city" and "on farms – tilling the land or growing crops to feed this starving nation" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 30), but the boys prefer crime as a way of life. These boys "should be in universities sucking knowledge and skills" and "teaching the illiterate nation to read & write", but instead of "saving lives that crumble like mud huts in decaying hospitals", the "scar-faced" boys are "forever drunk" with "deadened hearts" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 30-31). Noteworthy is that the poet neither identifies the boys as disgruntled and hopeless graduates nor ascribes their criminality to their inability to secure a job after graduation. The poet does, however, expose the social circumstances in which the boys live; it is an environment characterised by malnutrition, service delivery protests against the government, ill-health, violence, unemployment and other poor living conditions. Thus, at the basic level, the poet shows that this is the only kind of life that the boys are exposed to on a daily basis. To this effect, prospects of acquiring university education and engaging in community development projects are yet to be conceivable in these boys' minds. With this, the poet also hints at the government's failure to empower the youth towards self-development. Black on Black crime also becomes a normalcy in such a context.

The people who reside in the same community with these boys lose their possessions as a result of break-ins, theft and violent threats. There is no peace and harmony in the South African communities, the poet avers, because of the youth who have nothing else to do, but commit crime. In these circumstances, the poet discloses that even the police rarely intervene timeously although the police station is "just three kilometres away" from the community; the police probably know that the "stone-hearted thieves" come "armed to the teeth" and are always eager "to slit throats" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:32). Even in instances where neighbours witness the criminal acts, they are too scared to intervene or call the police because they do not "want to be witnesses in court" or worse, they probably "work with the prowlers from seshego" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:33). Augmenting the community's distrust in the police is that, even the 'hustler' or "The Hawker" (Bila, 2006:16) who attempts to make ends meet in a 'dignified' way, is still a victim of police brutality. Such a hawker suffers at the hands of the police who

> arrest her
> in the morning at dusk
> kick her goods away her butt too
> oftentimes they bundle her down like a goat
> take off her skirt rip through her thighs
> they say they are fighting crime and grime

Thus, to the poet, "the real criminals" are "men in navy blue suits" and "women in floral skirts and high heels, heads of state, councillors and bankers meet over sumptuous dinner to consolidate plans to oppress the poor who sell on the pavements of the city" (Bila, 2006: 16). These officials have no regard for the brutalised hawker's distress. They either do not know or do not care, or both, that

> the hawker from the decaying township
> married to a retrenched factory worker
> with five hungry and angry children
> squashed in a matchbox
> is simply not wanted
> on the pavements of joburg

The battered hawker has no place under South Africa's free market sun, the poet says. The "left-talking, right-acting president" also seems unaware and unconcerned about his citizens who live in abject poverty. In such a circumstance, it seems the only alternative is crime for the likes

of 'boys from Seshego'. Where crime is the norm, artists like "Gito Baloi" (Bila, 2006: 26) eventually feature in the newspapers' common parlance, that is,

> thugs sprayed bullets
> over your sacred body
> they chose to mug your voice
> other than earthly treasures
> where were the state police
> for the joburg city lights were bright enough?

When inquisitions are made about who killed Gito Baloi, the "street sweeper" and the "morning taxi driver" both claim that they did not hear the gunshots; no one saw or knows anything about the murder. For the likes of Gito Baloi, the only way to be safe is to "be surrounded by bodyguards with machine guns" who "wear bulletproof clothes", although this is not how artists should live, the poet avers. The poet's only credible haven of safety from these thugs is a visit to "the heartland of real sangomas" who through their magical or supernatural powers can cause the "mindless wolves" to "be trapped" in the poet's apartment, "running around the house which will become an anthill" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:32-33). The poet would rather put his confidence in the *sangomas* (traditional healers) than in the police, because the *sangomas* are able to "erect a fence of snakes to guard [the] house" against thieves, can cause the thieves to "run around naked [with] dangling penises sweeping the floor" and can make the thieves bleat "slippery liquid forming in [their] mouths" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 34). Through this poem, the poet reveals that the subaltern, who live susceptible to criminal activities day and night, would rather vest their confidence in their cultural and traditional tropes than in the government's protection. With this, the poet implies that Black people's protection is essentially reliant on them, and not the government.

In the poem, "The toilet cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:27), the poet revisits the life and work of the South African youth in the persona of a "young and energetic" toilet cleaner. In the poem, a contrast is drawn between "the man in the urinal wearing an expensive black suit, executive tie and pointed shoes […] – this familiar black diamond" and the toilet cleaner who refers to the toilet as his office. By 'black diamond', the poet pejoratively refers to the new Black middle class in South Africa, who are also viewed as South Africa's fast growing, affluent and influential Black community. During

the apartheid regime, they were, of course, an underclass just like any other Black person, but with the affirmative action programmes introduced by the democratic government, the Black Diamonds were brought into existence. These Blacks who virtually benefitted from the affirmative action programmes and policies are generally involved in South Africa's lucrative gold and diamond mining, hence the coinage of the term 'Black Diamonds'.

Black Diamonds are often viewed as 'new money' and can afford clothes and accessories with conspicuous brands as well as luxurious cars, among other things. They are also perceived as being a materialistic caste with little regard for charity or benign typically African, social precepts like Ubuntu. Hence, the poet emphasises the point that the so-called 'Black Diamond' seems unbothered by his fellow Black man's dry humour about the toilet being his office, and resorts to a sarcastic remark instead about the toilet cleaner's place of work: "You have a nice office man!" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:27) and bursts into uncontrollable laughter. Here, the poet intends to highlight that not all Black people are impoverished after all, others push suitcases "full of modern gadgets, cash, credit cards, important documents and perhaps a bottle of whisky" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 27) while others are doomed to cleaning toilets for the likes of this Black Diamond. Here, the poet depicts some of South Africa's young and energetic people as mere toilet cleaners to bolster the idea that not much has changed for numerous Black people, even after decades into liberation. For the most part, the poet ascribes the dehumanisation, disillusionment and despair of the Black population in postcolonial South Africa to the indifference and corruption of the political leaders. These political leaders are portrayed as only concerned about serving their own interests and living posh lives at the expense of their own people. In the poem, "Hotel" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 28), the persona provides insight into the world of post-independence comrades:

> We are here to work
> to write reports and resolutions
> and we only have two days
> but my comrades say they work better
> in rooms with balconies and air conditioners
> and plasma tv with hundreds of channels

The crass materialism of the leaders is, to the poet, the cause of the perpetual suffering of the Black population. In instances where the leaders have to convene and plan the future of the nation, all they do is

make endless demands on how their need for luxury and comfort should be catered for. The persona's comrades apparently "work well in rooms with king-size beds" and "like to travel business class". The poet laments that these 'comrades' who could do so well with little 'yesterday' now seem unable to cope without an endless supply of resources to sustain their greed and gross materialism. Both the Black Diamonds and political leaders, or Black Diamonds who are also political leaders, rely on the labour of the lower class to generate their wealth and enrich themselves. Among such people who enrich both the Black and White elite are the poor who work in the lucrative business. The poem, "Burgersfort Landfill" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:38) comes close to surmising the reality of the rural poor who compete for food with animals at a dumping site in Burgersfort. Burgersfort is a South African town situated near the border of the two provinces, Limpopo and Mpumalanga, and is rich in platinum and platinum group metals. In such a rich place, one would not expect that the residents would be described as "vultures" and "grim-faced shack dwellers with famished children" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017: 38). In this rich place, the dwellers live off discarded food dumped at the landfill. The common practice is that,

> When the waste delivery truck arrives
> The dark human vultures shove and shuffle
> Fighting over dirt, competing with rats and pigs
>
> No one talks about this grim enterprise
> The vultures hope to turn rags to riches
> In this, our wasted economy

Decades into liberation and Black South Africans still fight for leftovers at dumping sites. It is for this reason that the poet questions the legitimacy of 'Black empowerment' programmes and policies preached by government officials:

> When ministers talk of black empowerment
> No one mentions this grim enterprise
> Which tries in vain to turn rags to riches
>
> But on election day –
> The vultures are fed with pap and beef stew
> Dressed in clean T-shirts with the leader's face

The grim reality in which the poor at Burgersfort and elsewhere in South Africa live is manipulated by the politicians in order to secure votes when the election season arrives. Politicians succeed in winning over the poor, not only by giving them free food and T-shirts, but also by giving them false hope on election day. This false hope often comes veiled by quoting "karl marx, lenin and poets" (Bila, 2006: 16), to deceive the masses. After the elections, the poor go back to the dumping sites to fend for food and other means of survival while the political leaders continue with the self-aggrandisement at the expense of the public. To the poet, postcolonial South Africa for these poor people is no different from the Burgersfort landfill which is nothing but "a celestial graveyard of hopes" (*Sweep of the Violin*, 2017:38). Overall, Bila's poetry not only brings the diabolical nature of the racist regime, both in the colonial and postcolonial epochs, into critical focus, but also deconstructs any contrived mythologies invented by post-independence leaders to deceive the masses about the government's agendas. Bila's poetry thus emerges as a scathing attack on the post-independence leadership of South Africa for its deleterious tendencies against the future of the country.

Towards a Contextualised Understanding of the Thematic Lynchpins of Bila's Poetry

When South Africa was finally 'free' from apartheid, it was envisaged that the conditions of the formerly oppressed South Africans would be better. The irony, however, was that most of those who fought for the end of apartheid behaved like bourgeois apartheid architects (Ojaide, 2017). The new lavish style of the Black South African rulers, as observed by Ojaide, not only contradicted the African National Congress' ideology but also exposed the crass materialism of the new rulers who were interested in self-gratification rather than fulfilling the ideals of the struggle against apartheid. This neo-colonial behaviour did not go unnoticed, particularly by socially conscious poets such as Vonani Bila. As a socially conscious poet, Bila leans on the aesthetic of social realism to cut across different social and political issues that affect societal life in postcolonial South Africa. In his need to ventilate upon the verities of social life in postcolonial South Africa, Bila considers the aesthetic of social realism as a literary technique capable of lending his texts an air of objective authenticity. Because of its employment of social realism, Bila's poetry easily finds resonance with both literary and "non-literary audiences so well because it speaks to their lives, their anger and

frustration and desire for what should be – for the transformation of the outside landscape so that the inner one might flourish" (Waller, 2007: vii). Bila's poetry, according to Waller (2007), carries strongly the poet's inner voice and binds it to the real world, and this real world for Bila is postcolonial South Africa. According to Ojaide, Bila draws on these societal anomalies as his themes not because they are fashionable, but because they describe the lives of the many people – the people and communities he knows so well. Bila writes in order to protest the inequalities and exploitation that characterise the South African society. His works progressively project a movement dedicated to eradicating social problems, including the oppression and abuse of women, children, prejudice against immigrants, discrimination against racial minorities, unsafe housing conditions, and exploitative labour practices. In the process, Bila depicts postcolonial South Africa as an anxious and unsteady nation in transition and still in need to deliver far more than it has yet been able to, which on its own exacerbates the postcolonial South African citizenry's disillusionment. A further study of Bila's poetry may explore the remedial interventions, if any, that Bila proposes as necessary to address the challenges faced by the subaltern Black population of South Africa.

Conclusion

This article has revealed that Bila's poetry relies on the aesthetic of realism to paint a sordid picture of Black South Africans who live in abject poverty even after decades into liberation. Bila damns "genetically modified rulers" (Bila, 2007:95) in South Africa who still depend on their ex-colonial masters for economic empowerment. Decades beyond the institutional demise of colonialism, South Africa, although saturated with "gold glitters beneath the earth", still has its leaders carrying "a [NEPAD] begging bowl" before colonial masters overseas (Bila, 2007: 95). This, for the poet, necessitates the question, "In the name of Amandla", "what has changed?" (Bila, 2007: 92). To Bila, postcolonial South Africa is yet to answer the question honestly and adequately. Employing the literary technique of social realism in Bila's poetry is an effective strategy to realistically depict and fearlessly castigate the post-independence leadership for its adoption and implementation of injudicious and therefore ineffective policies and programmes. Bila's poetry thus becomes relevant and influential in the repugnant depiction of South Africa's political and social life. Through the aesthetic of

realism, Bila typically brings to light the Fanonian downsides of national consciousness and liberation as Black people in South Africa scuffle to live a gratifying life. Bila is aware that the liberation struggle in South Africa was chiefly premised on the land issue since South Africans were forcibly removed from their native, arable land by the White colonial masters. Land, to South Africans in particular and Africans in general, not only represents economic significances, but also cultural ones because it links them to their ancestors who are buried in it (Wasosa, 2012). Hence, Bila thematically inflects the forced removals of South African Blacks by their oppressors as a major grievance still unaddressed by the government of the day. Post-independence leadership's failure to redistribute land to its rightful owners, according to Bila, has resulted in numerous South Africans living in deplorable conditions.

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