

**STEPPING WITH SEITLHAMO MOTSAPI:  
DIRECTION FOR SOUTH AFRICAN POETRY**

**NDAVHE RAMAKUELA**

**I**n my final year of undergraduate studies our English lecturer introduced what was then a contemporary debate: the contention by Albie Sachs that there should be a complete ban on the use of culture as a weapon of struggle. It was followed by another lecture on Ndebele whose views bordered on Sachs's. For me, then, there was no question whether art or culture had to be politically committed because I was already immersed in the coterie of Mzwakhe Mbuli and what I looked for in any literature was that it should contribute meaningfully to our liberation.

So much has changed since then in the debates concerning aesthetics and politics. Today there are debates about the status and direction of South African poetry. The anthology *The Heart in Exile* (1996), edited by Leon de Kock and Ian Tromp, which was supposed to capture the essence of South African poetry between 1990 and 1995, was met with mixed reviews, some critics dismissing it for its failure to include some of the recent poets like Lesego Rampolokeng, whilst the editors themselves maintain that the anthology reflects a general South African condition: its unease with the past and something of an inability to settle in the current dispensation. In his article, 'The Flame Tree of Freedom: Poetry and Apartheid', Peter Anderson makes some remarks on what he calls 'new poetry' which he sees as just conforming to the old order of resistance or protest:

Part of its conformity lies in its resembling the poetry of the first type. The difference is that it tends to be less inventive, more concerned with consolidating the gains of the first. It has lost freshness. Or rather, freshness is not the point. Affirmation of the new order is.

(7)

Ironically it is one of Lesego Rampolokeng's poem which he uses to judge what he calls 'poetry of the second type that is beginning to settle into the mechanical gestures of an official nationalism' (8).

It is statements like these that make one wonder whether in the new dispensation -whatever that is - there hasn't been any kind of poetry. Have the arguments of Sachs and Ndebele provoked no response? My answer to that is Seithlamo Motsapi's collection, *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow*.

Motsapi's poetry is not primarily concerned with the new order in South Africa, or violence, unemployment, or the new political leadership in South Africa. The poems are a reawakening of a sense of self-worth, humanist in orientation but much more personal. Although the universal political situation as it reflects imperialism is not forgotten, it is its dehumanizing tendencies that are called to account. The poetry clicks deep into our imagination and reminds us of the emptiness of the world we inhabit. The depthlessness of the modern world is balanced by the presence of hope to be found in nature, human beings and the Creator. Where we forget the simple values of life Motsapi reminds us that's where life is nurtured, where creation begins and ends. These are poems of an ordinary person, talking to a world that is obsessed with materialism, worships money, trivializes poverty, and fails to see its wrongs, the world which might look for life on Mars rather than look at its own weaknesses.

Motsapi seems to be showing us where poetry should go, to constantly invoke in us the humanity we see in each other's faces, the peace inherent in each one of us and how to achieve it. Isn't it surprising to hear that what we actually need is not found in money or in the space shuttle going to Mars? We are encouraged to look beyond materialism to find what is 'sober, simple & humble' ('the man') and if we set our hearts right 'it will rain, it will rain'. This simplicity is best captured by Elgin:

Here is a sampling of the definitions of voluntary simplicity that strike a resonant chord with me: *a manner of living that is outwardly more simple and inwardly more rich; ... a deliberate choice to live with less in the belief that more of life will be returned to us in the process; ... a path toward consciously learning that enables us to touch the world ever more lightly and gently; ... a paring back of the superficial aspects of our lives so as to allow more time and energy to develop the heartfelt aspects of our lives.* (33)

On its publication in 1996 Laura Chrisman had this to say about the structure of the collection:

Opening poems set up the fundamentals of Motsapi's aesthetic-political concerns (social conflict, black poverty, the values of humbleness, love, hope). Then the journey begins, starting with an exploration of black music as a privileged metaphor of contemporary black identity, assessing concomitantly the forces of cultural amnesia and residual heritage at work. (65)

The book's contents and the direction of this poetry are best summed up by Ritske Zuidema who speaks about the variety of themes in Motsapi's poetry:

In a sense, this peculiar variety reflects the increasing complexity of the political reality of South Africa which can no longer be grasped in the systems of binary oppositions generated by most conventional ideologies. On another level it reflects the poet's own personal journey from a firm commitment to militant black politics to the embrace of Christianity and a search for spiritual values. (117)

It is in poems like 'the man', 'tenda', 'bratha saul', 'bratha mooses' that the absence of the simple life is deplored, but the poet refuses to be pessimistic because in these individuals he sees a resemblance of what life should look like. In a world dominated by postmodern ideas of ambivalence, ambiguity, fictionality, historylessness, rootlessness, discontinuities, the poems above revert to what is ordinary, valuable, that which can be reordered -humanity. 'the man' itself is a poem of magnified proportions, which sets a trend for the rest of the collection. Downplaying what is commonly understood as 'the modern world' or 'civilization', it is a reminder that the modern world is not a fact but a mental and material construct and therefore open to change. In 'the man' a nameless character becomes an epitome of ordinary life; his head is not full of theories 'of grey-haired' man like Einstein or Darwin. He is not full of unattainable ambitions, his is an ordinary life. The images and the metaphors used are common to all of us: rain as a central metaphor for prosperity follows this man as he enters town. This metaphor is supplemented by other images of heavens, forest, sun, dreams, angels and the 'imposing peace of the blue-gum in his backyard' which suggest a peaceful coexistence of human beings and nature. The man comes into town, a symbol of modernity, seemingly a dry place, both spiritually and physically, and his presence brings prosperity in the form of rain which the doctors, lawyers and teachers could not bring. The idea still

is: those values that are forgotten are the ones human beings should aspire to. 'the man' yearns for simplicity, humility and naturalness.

If in 'the man' Motsapi advocated through his character a standard for perfection or the ideal, he makes that more practical in 'tenda'. There we see a manifestation of those qualities ascribed to the man. If in 'the man' he raised issues of plainness, in 'tenda' he affirms the attainability of those values. The subject of the poem is associated with mountains, he is 'peaceful like distances', he flows with 'water from the ancient well', he is associated with innocence. To Motsapi what makes a person worth remembering is not the measurable achievements, not even the titles we acquire in the process, but a humble, radiant love which is 'finely present/& yet invisible like the sky'. Tenda's perfection is seen against the indictment of 'us', 'we' or 'I' in 'the man', an indictment that questions the values society holds on to. Neither the poet nor the society is exonerated from human weaknesses. The refrain in 'tenda', 'since you are like everyone of us', reminds us of the attainability of such things as are found in 'tenda'. The idea is each person has a natural inclination to do good but because of the self-aggrandisement and the world we live in we continually drift from the truth.

The characters in 'tenda' and 'the man' are a rare species in our society yet such characters dominate Motsapi's poetry. In 'brotha moses' a tribute is paid to a modest man whose modesty earns him the title of angel.

they finally laid him to rest  
 the little man without kingdom or slaves  
 he lived in a house without mirrors or theories or  
 velour  
 which is why from a distance  
 he always looked green like a hymn  
 when he opened his mouth  
 it was to share with us the solid breeze  
 that always come to sleep at his heart...

Again here there seems to be harmony between the subject, nature and the Creator. This is the form of spirituality Motsapi advocates, not one bred in theological schools or seminars or preached by American televangelists. It depends on no institution, it lies within human hearts, it lies in humanity's acceptance of its weaknesses and the promise of redemption that follows. Corresponding to the infinities of human nature is the infinite grace of the creator. The failures of human beings to create a lasting and stable world are seen in poems like 'dawn' where two mortal beings are trying to find each other.

Their failure to discover each other completely as individuals leads them to an acceptance of their mortal weaknesses which are, of course, subject to redemption. That's why Zuidema would further note that:

... the collection ... is filled with images of movement, crossing rivers, arrival and rebirth. They symbolise Motsapi's deep personal need to come to God and re-discover the spirituality and human essence within himself. (122)

Motsapi's poetry continues to explore this emptiness in the political and economic system which has commodified life. Imperialism here gets its share of blame. Critics have identified this strain in Motsapi as 'pan-African' (Zuidema and Chrisman). I would endorse this assertion and argue that this gives specificity or elaboration to the universal theme of seeing our world as empty, waiting for renewal. In 'bratha saul' Motsapi uses Rastafarian music and rhythm to emphasise how in celebrating the little things we have we shouldn't forget the plight of the oppressed:

listen ras lissen here  
 jus don let de green of de spliff  
 curtain u from the red of mah blood  
 as pidgin babylon runs with the gold

don let de rhythm ride u  
 when mah glass of freedom splinters  
 don let u be muted rub-a-dub  
 to de clang-a-clang of de chain  
 as mah green of tomorrow  
 gives in at de knee ....

remember lyaan  
 death hovers above like ready vultures  
     mah bass is de fire  
     blood muffles de drum  
     & de mic gurgles red

i'll keep de yeling red  
 while i chase de looted gold  
 mah green is a bridge to u  
 till then



is hopeful that despite all the problems 'we are at peace here'. Here the struggle to be hopeful and the impossibilities thereof are expressed in the sentences 'we are at peace here / even while our lungs are full / of secret wars / & primordial fears bruise our suns / we are at peace here robert'. The view is not totally clear. This is one poem which Zuidema associates with the new South Africa and suggests that the poet is not very sure about the future of South Africa. Indeed; - but it is also a struggle within the human heart, its convulsions and victory, and what we all have to learn are 'the painful lessons of love'. The pun here is to indicate that the struggle to recreate is not simple: he has never loved who has never experienced pain. We know and understand love through pain.

Motsapi also plays with the language, constructing images and wrenching the meaning of words from their original contexts. This constant use of punning, which even forms part of the titles, is explained by Peter Horn, who observes:

[P]uns are just one of the many devices poets use to subvert the automatic flow of normative language .... [P]unning, for Motsapi, is an attempt to constantly undermine the sounds and the printed image of the coloniser's language. (22)

In 'bratha saul' Rastafarianism is employed and in 'the sun used to be white' there are statements like 'melting into the purple nikon pose/of tourist disca/dence'. Here the tourists or missionaries or whites are now called 'tourist', a corruption of 'terrorist', to emphasize the extent of the brutality of their system and the damage it caused for black people. Or words like 'feelantropists' for philanthropist, thereby undermining their 'invaluable' work; and 'micro/scopegoat', depreciating scientific findings and suggesting that they are used as scapegoats when people want to run away from the mess they have made of the world.

It is again in 'djeni' that language is pushed to its extreme to reveal the effects of imperialism:

i am the nude mad  
 drums warring blur in the head  
 loinskin mosquito google  
 friendli & fissical -  
 seh the antropologists

i am the nu man, mad i chant  
 love song - gobbledigom i mumble  
 chant me michael jerksin the spepsi/perm

while thy kwashiokor me  
 they the world  
 as sah geldof shuttles out  
 of the sand of the tv crew  
 in addis

This language is almost that of an ordinary man on the street. Here the contest is not only about the content but how that very coloniser's language can be used against them. The language of imperialist media culture is present, as are the stock misconceptions about Africans. One is immediately reminded of Rider Haggard's novels where a stereotypical African is seen as 'friendli & fissional'.

From reading the poems above I tend to disagree with some of Peter Horn's conclusions about Motsapi. He says in his review, 'Motsapi is not without his blind spots, his political correctness and cliches' (22). Perhaps if one read only one of these poems one could make this kind of judgement, but I see in Motsapi a transcendence of political correctness and a dislike for political ideology or any ideology at that, thus producing an independent voice calling for humanity to rethink itself. This is a 'rebel voice' in the line of morality. In support of these views I again quote Laura Chrisman:

A very far cry from official new South Africa pietistic discourse of reconciliation, this collection brilliantly fuses pan-Africanist militancy, romantic spirituality, and scathing attack on neo-colonialism in its global and local forms. The political urgency is never, here, experimental poetry, raining down fresh imagery, complex conceits, carefully patterned to produce a volume of striking originality and stylish rigour. (60)

This I see as the way Motsapi can be read today, charting a way forward for poetry in South Africa and the world which will remind us of our simple human responsibilities.



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