Review by Tlhalo Sam Raditlhalo

fhedzi: *iamgoingtoknowmgwalopatterns*
by Khulile Nxumalo

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Khulile Nxumalo's second collection of poems provides the reason why his first collection, *ten flapping elbows, mama* (Deep South, 2004) was such a welcome surprise on the literary scene. In this newest collection he expands his prodigious talent, coming out in Part I of the collection with a mixture of narrative style, relying primarily on the oral traditional modes of incarnation and evocation. The first poem in the collection, 'malebo & prologue' is intriguing for someone well-versed in South African languages primarily, but also in the varieties of township slang, popular culture and songs by groups such as Mahlatini and the Mahotella Queens. The poem evolves into an invocation of salutations mainly to family members, friends and fellow poets and a bow to fellow alternative cultural groups such as 'the chimurenga people'. It is an intriguing admixture of people, friends and phenomena with no discernible narrative strand at all. And yet, for reasons best known to the human mind, it has *resonance*.

Consider the opening lines:

> *... dili/dili*
> *didizela/mdididzeli*
> *hiccup/skielog*
> exercise/by numbers/begin …
> but laaaawd!
> just to begin!

Lines such as these are confusing on first reading, and require patience to see how they fit in with the rest of the poem. Take, for instance, this section of the poem:

here is my avid dream
two, here is my aunty *makwerele, na vhothe*
three, *mokekulu gogo matodzi phophi*
four, *vhopaternal* grandfather
andries sikhwari radzilani

vhonjabulo (shandu)
vhothenjiwe (mapolina)
vhomaureen matodzi vhothando …

thi ambe
ndiholebuha
ngamanda!

The *dili/dili* in the opening now begins to make sense: evoking a song by Mahlatini and the Mahotella Queens shows the speaker coaxing himself to begin the evocation for, as the third and fourth lines show, the speaker has been procrastinating, working himself up to a state of readiness, even mocking himself with being '*skielog*' (township slang for a one-eyed person). Thus when he segues into the section mentioned above, the speaker's objective is plain, to lay claim to the family relations close to his heart, from his aunty down to Maureen Matodzi. The last three lines of the segment are important as a rounding off of this piece, for the speaker clearly states:

i got nothing to say
i am thankful
very much so!

(My translation)

This mixture of English and Tshivenda to construct a complex set of seemingly disparate associations and thoughts lacking in a narrative strand is a new departure for Nxumalo given his previous collection. And yet, there is a logic here, for this mode of writing and expression was anticipated by Njabulo S. Ndebele when he mulled over the idea of a novel, or any narrative, written in a number of South African languages (2007), or even by David Attwell, writing about 'the experimental turn' necessary for South African literature to grow

(*Rewriting Modernity*, 2005). It is an experiment whose time has come.

The next poem, shorter in composition and titled 'prayer', reminisces over the lost causes that were prevalent in the 1980s, as well as casting a wry look back at the fashion statements that made people's lives acquire meaning, such as hairstyles:

> we still summon
> the S-curl, perm our hair
> the homelands
> the 99-year lease, home and house stand
> the Cosas "each one-teach-one"
> bombastic slogan that is now just deafness
>
> 'pass-one-pass-all"
> dangerous demand.
>
> ('prayer')

In these demands that the black communities used to rely on to move a recalcitrant state to accountability and proper governance, we notice the stasis of the demands that were made then, and the incongruity in the present, the dangerous demands that have morphed into dreams deferred, resulting in some rather violent protests around a country that cannot seem to divest itself of the dead weight of the homelands' system. It is this 'struggle mentality' that poor communities seemingly hang on to, as well as the dysfunctional education system that has rendered dreams a near-impossibility to countless school drop-outs.

The title poem, 'fhedzi' begins the experimental line in the text, together with 'battlelines (*tsietsi fela* piece, number 5)'. It is in these poems that Nxumalo comes closest to a coherent narrative strategy, even as the reader struggles to make sense of it all. Take, for instance, the following run-on lines:

> Come, and we skirt its very endsand dislodge ourselved entirelylook/upon the magnificent signsof freedom coming, look for, far for, a day/or twobecause we've come to hear the battle, so easily, becausewe/know we are yet to

> hearambigouous riddles … victory is a/dream, heaped like a universe, it sends us hungry messengersfin-/gers pointed to the shallows … where the final outcomelike everybody else in world/we wear star-spangled noptoc' takes thegarments develop a habit of laughing on the/ cue, then there are those whose dreamsare much harder to make/outin them we have radish hands, streaksand the scars and the/sweets… .
>
> ('battlelines')

It is easy, with this segment, to misread the speaker's intentions, but for this reviewer the recurrence of dreams having been distorted stands out; thus the idea of a 'victory' has been subverted. This has allusions to the real problem of the South African dream being deferred, to use Mark Gevisser's title to his biography of the former state president, Thabo Mbeki.

In 'the tsietsi fela we made, looks down (*tsietsi fela*, number 3)', Nxumalo continues to look at the words spoken and the results of such words. Tellingly, he starts the poem with the line 'oh hush, hush, here starts the gossiper'. He then segues into a mock-serious stanza, saying:

> our presidents say Africa's time is
> this century, a rule high above
> a cloud of clocks

An intriguing juxtaposition here is the 'gossiper' whose words ring hollow, even after the efforts of 'endless seminars' while 'millions' are 'dead' and 'millions' will be 'born'. This suggestive of an endless cycle of discussions around development policies and the vaunted African Renaissance, which have been ineffective in tackling perennial problems facing the continent.

Part 2 of the collection is made up of a long poem titled 'The Melville Plenoptic'. The notes at the beginning call it a 'choreo-poem', that is, a poem written for performance and theatrical dis/play. It is a poem with a setting and a cast, among whom is The Main Rememberer whose recollections are put down in an e-mail from Berlin to his interlocutors in Melville. It may be that a choreo-poem differs markedly from Mothobi Motloatse's proemdra in Michael Chapman's *A Century of South African Poetry* (1981), but the

experimental intent is apparent in both. To this reviewer, however, 'The Melville Plenoptic' takes this experimentation too far, losing itself in its quest to be original, to attain stratospheric brilliance. Unfortunately it comes across as boring, not well-thought out and lacks the originality of Motloatse's 'Ngwana wa Azania: *a proemdra for oral delivery*'. It takes the style in which it is written – what Nxumalo calls pyscho-narration – too far in an attempt to be obscure or difficult. But long poems, even book-length ones such as Mongane Serote's *Third World Express* (1992), make their poetry through being simple but maintaining a taut reason, on the one hand, and feeling, on the other.

A beautiful, teasing and refined poem opens Part 3, titled 'my lips outside your door'. So many situations are addressed here that the reader is never sure if the speaker requests a lover to let him in, or that this metaphoric phrase stands for a manifesto of sorts, as when the speaker opines:

> I'm done with make-like texts, papers, make-like friends
> With the terseness of english poems,
> Tying around whatever neck, a rope
> A rope that will soon trip me up

The whole poem provides a proper illustration of what Nxumalo's experimentation is all about, when, on the blurb of *ten flapping elbows, mama* he says that he write in a manner " … beyond the understanding that the 'inside of one's head', and 'the objective world' are really distinct worlds". The conversational tone of 'my lips outside your door' tantalises the reader, forcing us to grope for meaning that seems just beyond our grasp. It is a masterfully realised poem that reveals Nxumalo's abundant promise.

At one point in his career, in an interview with Susan Gardiner, the late Stephen Watson was asked if there any black poets that he admired. His response was sarcasm redefined. He said: "No, not one. There's no one amongst them whom I want to read and re-read (and the writers whom you don't want to re-read, I find, don't really exist." (quoted in Hirson 2013:41)

Now, in 2014, 30 years after this statement, Nxumalo exists, and readers will hopefully wish to read and re-read him. This slim volume

of poems certainly points to his freshness in the South African Republic of Letters.

fhedzi is the Tshivenda word for 'only, but almost, nearly', and it is a fitting title for this tantalising collection of poems that tease one's mind as one reads them, much like the decorative geometric Ndebele patterns and paintings – the mgwalo patterns – from which one tries to discern or wrought order, but ends up mesmerised by the sheer beauty of it all.

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