

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS POETRY: WRITING AGAINST APARTHEID

Thengani H. Ngwenya

Durban University of Technology

Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT)

ngwenyat@dut.ac.za

We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face (Steven Bantu Biko, *I Write What I Like* 1979).

This chapter seeks to explore the interconnections between the philosophy of Black Consciousness in South Africa and English poetry published in the 1960s and 1970s by the four black African poets who, over the years, have been given the status of representing Black Consciousness by critics and editors of poetry anthologies. Taking the form of a wide-ranging critical overview, the chapter focuses on selected poems illustrating particular themes, perspectives as well as poetic techniques and conventions in the poetry of this era.

Biko's prophetic words quoted above remind us that Black Consciousness is essentially a philosophy of humanity (*ubuntu*) and national redemption. In line with his conception of Black Consciousness as a regenerative and redemptive philosophy Biko's definition of blackness is both pragmatic and all-embracing:

We have in our policy manifesto defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition are politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations (*I Write*, 1979).

For Biko and other proponents of Black Consciousness, blackness does not merely denote skin pigmentation but is “a reflection of a mental attitude”. It is as a consequence of this unambiguous and strategic conception of ‘blackness’ that Indian, ‘Coloured’, Black African poets wrote poems tackling the theme of the ‘black experience’ in apartheid South Africa. Essentially, the ideology of apartheid and the discriminatory legislation it spawned negated the humanity of all South Africans regardless of race. Although, for various reasons, literary scholars have tended to focus on the work of Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, Mbuyiseni Mtshali and Sipho Sepamla, there is a broader group of poets of all races who were committed to the task of liberating all South Africans from the ideology of apartheid and its concomitant values, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. This group includes white, Indian and so-called coloured poets such as Peter Horn, Jeremy Cronin, Richard Rive, Abdulla Ibrahim (known primarily as a jazz musician), James Mathews, Essop Patel, Chris van Wyk, Fazel Johennesse, Shabbir Bannobai and Farouk Asvat.

Echoing Biko, the critic Achille Mbembe explains why South Africans of all races stood to benefit from what he sees as a forward- looking and inherently positive philosophy of Black Consciousness:

In a context in which the possibility of being human was foreclosed for both blacks and whites the concept of “Black Consciousness” became the name of a different life to come – it was from the start, a philosophy of life and a philosophy of hope (*We Write What We Like*, 2007: 137).

The studies of literary critics such as Tim Couzens (1978), Jacques Alvarez-Prereyre (1979), Ursula Barnett (1983), Michael Chapman (1980, 1984 and 1996), Nadine Gordimer (1973), Kelwyn Sole (1983), Jane Watts (1989), Piniel Viriri Shava (1989), Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane (1991, 1992) and David Attwell (2005) have confirmed the status of Black Consciousness poetry as a distinctive category of creative writing by Black South African poets who chose or were forced by historical circumstances to write in English during the 1960s and 1970s. Apart from the four established poets mentioned

above there were, of course, other lesser known poets of this era whose work appeared in the various anthologies of South African black English poetry including Andre Brink's *A World of their Own : Southern African Poets of the Seventies* (1976), Couzens and Patel's *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (1982), Chapman and Dangor's *Voices from Within : Black Poetry from Southern Africa* (1982) and Chapman's *A Century of South African English Poetry* (1981) and Stephen Gray's *Modern South African Poetry* (1984).

Although connections between political ideologies and artistic products are, at best, tenuous, it cannot be gainsaid that Black Consciousness as a philosophy and a political ideology inspired in direct and indirect ways the work of the poets who came into prominence in the late 1960s, flourished in the 1970s and continued to contribute to literary magazines such as *The Classic*, *The Purple Renoster*, *Staffrider*, *Contrast*, *Bolt*, *Ophir*, *New Coin Poetry*, *SASO Newsletter*, *MEDU Newsletter* and other publications.

The poetry which constitutes the subject of this chapter has been variously referred to as 'Post-Sharpeville Poetry', 'Soweto Poetry', 'New Black Poetry' and 'Protest Poetry'. In the introduction to the collection of short stories entitled *Hungry Flames* (1986) Mzamane offers the following description of the poetry of what he describes as a 'cultural renaissance' in black South African writing:

Black Consciousness and the literature it inspired emerged in midst of political and cultural repression after Sharpeville. The new wave of writers who emerged in South Africa after 1967 appeared to shy away at first from the more explicit medium of prose and took up poetry, after the manner of established literary figures such as James Matthews. ... Between 1967 and 1974 the cultural renaissance which accompanied the rise of Black Consciousness produced, at an unprecedented rate in the literary history of South Africa, many outstanding poets of the calibre of Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote, Siphosiphoshe Sepamla, Mafika Gwala, Mafika Mbuli, Mandlenkosi Langa and Njabulo Ndebele (*Hungry Flames*, xxi).

If one is looking for a book of poetry which set the stage for the poetry of the so-called New Black Poets then Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971) published by Renoster Books owned by Lionel Abrahams is without a doubt that book. Mtshali's seminal volume was soon followed by the debut collections of his contemporaries: Serote (*Yakhal'inkomo*, 1972), Sepamla (*Hurry Up to It*, 1975) and Gwala (*Jol' iinkomo*,) 1977, all published Ad. Donker. The publication of their poetry by these progressive white-owned publishing houses gave them an opportunity to express their anger and frustration while re-defining their personal and communal identities in a manner that was in stark contrast to the way they were labelled by the apartheid regime and its functionaries.

In its deliberate foregrounding of the theme of racial pride and of the need to acknowledge the humanity of black people, Black Consciousness poetry exhibits some striking thematic affinities with the poetry associated with Negritude as espoused by Aime Cesaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Leon Damas. It is, however, worth pointing out that the former was a direct response to the relatively unique South African political situation and was more of a liberation strategy than a philosophical outlook. In line with its conception as a transformative philosophy, Black Consciousness took, as its point of departure and *raison d'être* the need for political freedom rather than a desire to return to some mythic glorious past regarded as defining the essence of being African. As a political liberation strategy Black Consciousness had a direct impact on political mobilisation in the various sectors of the South African black community including forms of cultural expression such as sculpture, painting, music and literature.

Both revisionist historiography and collective identity reappraisal function as organising principles and defining themes in the poetry of associated Black Consciousness in South Africa. In line with this approach, the process re-writing history, whether this denotes a reevaluation of the past or strategising for the future, is a central preoccupation of the Black Consciousness poets. With regard to the theme of historical revisionism, there are poems which deal with the Bullhoek and Sharpeville massacres, the Soweto students'

uprisings of 1976, the assassination of political leaders and the deliberate distortion or outright erasure from collective memory of black history. In all these poems history in the broadest sense of the word is main subject. The first three stanzas of Gwala's poem entitled "Africa at a Piece (On Heroes Day)" captures the value and significance of the confluence of poetry and history :

You can't think of a solution
Without your mind spelling revolution
Unless your mind is steamed with pollution
So much that you drop the notion

As our heroes die
As our heroes our born
Our history is being written
With the black moments given
Looking the storm in the eye
Our hope is not gone

Our blackman's history
is not written in the classrooms
on wide smooth boards
Our history shall be written at the factory gates
At the Unemployment offices
In the scorched queues of dying mouths.

(The Return of the Amasi Bird, 358-359)

In a similar vein the speaker in the final stanza of Sepamla's 'History -books Amen!' explains of the responsibilities of the black poet:

I know my history damn well

I'd need to have you stand back so I tell it
by God you've breathed down my neck for too long
your ominous shadow cast over all my events blurring
 details of it
this same history of bloody wars and bitter tears
whose pain sears through the body of our nation.

(Selected poems 123)

As will be shown in the rest of this chapter, the poetry of this era in the history of black South African literature exemplifies in a direct and graphic way the complex interconnections between literature, history and politics. Eschewing the formalist conception of poetry as marked by technical complexity and sometimes obscure imagery and symbolism, Black Consciousness poets move with relative ease from the exhortatory language of the political rally to the standard Western poetic discourses they were taught at school. Thus, from the New Historicist critical perspective, it could be argued that Black Consciousness poets seek to textualize history while simultaneously historicising poetry. Elaborating on the role of the poet as historian Mtshali announces the recognisably historical and political nature of this poetry in the author's note to his second volume of poems *Fireflames* (1980) which was instantly banned on publication:

These poems, written during the past few years, were inspired by personal, social, economic and, most especially, political events in South Africa. The situation has been in a state of flux since the early 'Sixties, from which period we have been writhing with increasing momentum through the most crucial period in our relentless, tear-stained and blood-soaked struggle for our total liberation from racism, exploitation and dehumanisation.

Confirming Mtshali's words above, Michael Chapman (2006), a respected scholar of South African literature, points out that it is not always easy for critics and general

readers alike to distinguish between “art talk” and “politics talk” in the work of most South African writers especially those who were primarily writing against apartheid.

In its stated mission to redeem the human dignity of all South Africans and in particular black people and to give expression to various forms of racial oppression, Black Consciousness poetry resonates with the work of the African American poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s such as Claude Mackay and Langston Hughes as well with the fiercely revolutionary rhetoric of the Stokeley Carmichael’s Black Power of the 1960s and 1970s. Biko’s essays published in various publications during the 1960s and 1970s and collected in *I Write What I like* after his assassination have a similar resonance with Black Consciousness poetry that Alain Locke’s (1886-1954) seminal essay *The New Negro* (1925) which has been rightly described as “ the central text of the Harlem Renaissance” has for the poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance in the USA of the 1920s. When Langston Hughes says “I, too, sing America” / I, too, am America” (*The Norton Anthology*, 1258) he is affirming his humanity which he is certain his white fellow citizens will acknowledge at some point. Similarly, Claude Mackay’s poem “If We Must Die” (1919) captures the spirit of revolutionary defiance in the Afro American community which was to culminate in the sometimes violent and disruptive Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s in the US:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honour us though dead !

....

(*Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 984)

Like Gwala's poem quoted earlier, MacKay's angry poem is essentially about the anticipated revolution and the heroic sacrifices associated with it. Similarly, irrepressible feelings of revolutionary anger also characterise Mtshali's poem on written for the memorial service in honour of Ongkoepoetse Tiro at the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto in 17 February 1974:

A new order will be forged
on the anvil of our sorrows;
the flame in our furious hearts will flash
all the nocturnal conspiracies
at which deadly devices are made and sent,
to wound, to main, and to kill,
and spatter your sacrificial blood
on the door to freedom.

But no bomb can ever kill
the spirit of a fearless fighter,
no gun can shoot it,
no jail can hold it,
not even the grave will seal it off
from a people aroused to action.

(Fireflames, p.31)

Like Afro-American poetry associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Black Consciousness-inspired poetry is patently ideological and political in its themes and orientation. It is primarily for this reason that some critics found it banal and lacking sophistication (Watson, 1990; Livingstone 1982;). The recurrent themes which characterise the poetry of the four main Black Consciousness poets are those of black pride, the tactical foregrounding positive aspects of African traditional culture, communal self-respect and a rejection of imposed identities and roles. As one critic puts it, all these themes can be summed in one phrase: "the rediscovery of being black in the world"

(Mputlane wa Bofelo, 2008). Clearly evident in the work of all four poets mentioned above are attempts to bolster a new and radically politicised collective identity of the black community by citing examples of immediately recognisable instances of racial oppression and the prominent features multifaceted black urban culture. In order to ensure accessibility the poems, written in stark unadorned idiom, were published in literary magazines and newsletters and recited at political gatherings of SASO, BPC and at the meetings of community development organisations linked to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Serote's "Burning Cigarette" about the fate of black youth with no prospect of a meaningful life has a direct resonance with the experience of black communities in the 1970s:

This little black boy
Is drawn like a cigarette from its box,
Lit.
He looks up at his smoke hopes
That twirl, spiral, curl
To nothing.
He grows like cigarette ashes
As docile, as harmless;
Is smothered.

(Selected poems 30)

This carefully-crafted short poem captures with striking verbal economy the fate of millions of young people whose lives were 'smothered' in various ways by the inhuman system of apartheid. The combined effect of the poem's diction and imagery and the organising simile of a burning cigarette serve to reinforce the boy's utter helplessness and the complete hopelessness of his situation. In terms of its portrayal of young people trapped in debilitating social conditions this poem is comparable to Serote's other poems on the fate of the black youth of 1970s such as "My Brothers in the Street"; "A Sleeping Black Boy".

Serote's poem recalls Peter Abrahams' 'The Negro Youth' written in the typical protest mode and first published on 5 December 1936 in the *Bantu World*. Significantly, the young man who is the subject of the poem quoted below could be South African or American as he is not immediately recognisable as belonging to either context:

He stood alone,
A Negro youth.
What of his future?
His cap was worn,
This Negro youth.
Why was he born?
Born to lead an empty useless life,
Born to mar the record of his race,
Or born to lead his race?
Locked are the doors,
Locked- the doors of his future.
His burden to bear,
To suffer pain of life's cruel ways,
That is why he was born.

(The Return of the Amasi Bird, p 85)

As noted above, it has now become a critical commonplace to regard the Sharpeville massacre of 1961 as signalling the beginning of black protest poetry which was directly and stridently critical of the apartheid regime. It is, however, worth pointing out that the themes, imagery and symbolism of what is generally referred to as Black Consciousness poetry in South African creative writing have their origins in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of Peter Abrahams and H.I.E. Dhlomo both of whom were continuing a trend initiated by B. W. Vilakazi, S.E.K. Mqhayi, J.J.R. Jolobe and other politically-aware black poets who preceded them. Like the Black Consciousness poets of the 1970s, their poetry tackled the dehumanising effect of discriminatory legislation on the black community. Jolobe's "The Making of a Servant", Mqhayi's "The Prince of

Britain” and Vilakazi’s “ The Gold Mines” are more than just protest poems, they mark an unprecedented political consciousness and self-assertiveness on the part of black poets. The following lines from “The Gold Mines” by Vilakazi could have been written by any of the four BC poets mentioned above:

O see how day by day this land
Is being plundered by those who seized it –
The foreigners who enrich themselves
While I and my deprived black brothers
Are landless, penniless, empty-handed!

(Voices from Within, 47)

However, it is Peter Abrahams and H.I.E Dhlomo who dealt directly with the issues which were to become the defining themes of black poetry after Sharpeville and the subsequent banning and exile of writers who could have served as role models for Black Consciousness poets. For example, the conception of the poet as the self-appointed spokesperson of the oppressed black community which was to become a common feature of the poetry of the 1970s and 1980s is nowhere better articulated than in the final stanza of Abrahams’ poem entitled “Self” in his poetry volume entitled *A Blackman Speaks of Freedom (1940)*:

I’m a poet,
And through hunger
And lust for love and laughter
I have turned myself into a voice,
Southing the pain of the People
And the sunshine that is to be.

(Voices from Within 49)

All the four poets who like Abrahams saw themselves as the voices of the black community began their careers as poets by publishing in the literary magazines

mentioned above in the late sixties and early seventies. The first collection which featured all the major Black Consciousness poets is *To Whom It May Concern : An Anthology of Black South African Poetry (1973)*. The book derives its title from a biting satirical poem written by Sipho Sepamla decrying the impact of pass laws on the lives of black South Africans. In the first six lines of the poem reader is introduced to a nameless and faceless entity that is hardly recognisable as a human being. Moreover, as implicit in the title, the movement of this entity must be 'processed' clinically by an impersonal system. This poem exemplifies Sepamla's rare ability to combine direct political protest with satire and irony. It is precisely this quality which makes his work stand out in the general oeuvre of Black Consciousness poets.

Bearer

Bare of everything but particulars

Is a Bantu

The language of a people in southern Africa

He seeks to proceed from here to there

Please pass him on

Subject to these particulars

He lives

Subject to the provisions

Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925

Amended often

To update it to his sophistication

Subject to the provisions of the said Act

He may roam freely within a prescribed area

.....

(To Whom It May Concern p. 96)

Most of the poets represented in this seminal poetry collection subsequently established themselves as writer-activists who, in the words of Mafika Gwala, regarded "writing as a cultural weapon" (*Momentum* 1984). In dealing with the all-embracing theme of "black

experience” the poets played on the literal and symbolic meanings of blackness and its anti-thesis, whiteness. As the speaker in Serote’s poem “The Actual Dialogue” aptly reminds us, one of the key concerns of the BCM was to initiate a ‘dialogue’ between whites and blacks which could help in eliminating distrust, fear and insecurity:

Do not fear Baas.
It’s just that I appeared
And our faces met
In this black night that’s like me.
Do not fear –
We will always meet
When you do not expect me.
I will appear
In the night that’s black like me.
Do not fear –
Blame your heart
When you fear me-
I will blame my mind
When I fear you
In the night that’s black like me
.....

(Selected Poems p.19)

Genuine rapprochement between races is only possible through genuine dialogue in this battle of hearts and minds. Interestingly, in his first collection which bristles with irony and satire, *Hurry Up to It !* (1975) Sepamla also explores the theme of fear and mistrust in “Darkness”

yes sir i have arrived
walk the night if you dare
there i reign over death

'swonder you legislate the night
you crouch in retreat
crowding each nook in fear
of the stench of my blackness
agitated by a darkness

(Selected Poems p 24)

In their poetry in both oral and published versions these poets played on the literal and symbolic meanings of blackness and its anti-thesis, whiteness. Again, Serote captures the role of both groups of actors in the unfolding historical drama of apartheid in his poem 'Ofay-Watcher, Throbs-Phase' :

Phase XIII

White people are white people,
They are burning the world.
Black people are black people,
They are the fuel.
White people are white people,
They must learn to listen.
Black people are black people,
They must learn to talk.

(Selected Poems 41)

Perhaps the poem which best typifies the anger, militancy and self assertion of the black community is Serote's "What's in this Black Shit". In this frequently anthologised poem which explores the pervasive theme of 'black experience' in the post-Sharpeville era Serote zooms in on the notorious Pass Laws in the final stanza:

I'm learning to pronounce this "Shit" well,

Since the other day,
At the pass office,
When I went to get employment,
The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg,
So I said, hard and with all my might, "Shit!"
I felt a little better;
but what's good, is, I said it in his face,
A thing my father wouldn't dare do.
That's what's in this black "Shit"

(Selected Poems, 42

)

In this poem "Shit" becomes a metaphor for the anger and frustration of black community. As suggested in Serote's poem the black poetry of this era sought to re-claim the humanity of Black people and not only articulate their anger and frustration but also signal to the oppressor the anger of the black community could explode at any time. The speaker in Serote's poem alerts us to the differences between the different generations of black people, the deferential and subservient older generation and the militant and angry generation of the 1970s. In his long poem suggestively entitled "Getting of f the Ride" the of revolutionary self-transformation features throughout poem. The speaker states in explicit terms that one aspect of 'getting off the ride' entails a profound process of self-examination followed by a militant confrontation of the political and ideological discourses which construct black people in a new negative way:

.....

I ask again, what is Black?
Black is when you get off the ride.

.....

Black is energetic release from the shackles of Kaffir, Bantu, non-white.

(Voices from Within, p 138)

While firmly anchored in the present of Black Experience in its both rural and urban contexts, the poets of Black Consciousness also consciously adopted backward-looking or historical perspectives in some of their poems. Their conscious attempts to link the past with the present is also evident in the titles of their first collections : Mtshali invokes the that quintessentially African symbol, the drum; Serote and Gwala both use the title of Miriam Makeba's song about cattle. Without romanticising the traditional African culture and values, they highlight the heroism, national cohesiveness and relative peace which characterised pre-colonial communities in Southern Africa. A careful examination of the poems on African traditions reveals that they used symbols, myths and traditional cultural practices to bolster self-affirmation or assist black people in re-gaining self-respect. This is illustrated in poems such as Sepamla's "To Makanna and Nongqawuse" ; Mtshali's "Back to the Bush" and "The Birth of Shaka" and Gwala's "The Children of Nonti". For example, Gwala points to the indomitable qualities of African people, in particular, their ability to adapt to difficult conditions of living in "The Children of Nonti" :

Nonti Nzimande died long ago
Yet his children still live.
Generation after generation, they live;

.....

Sometimes a son rises above the others
of the children of Nonti. He explains the workings
and the trappings of white thinking.
The elders debate; And add to their abounding knowledge
Of black experience.
The son is still one of the black children of Nonti
For there is oneness in the children of Nonti.

Despite all the ongoing cultural changes the children of Nonti (black people) have retained the virtue of African humanism (*ubuntu*) the central principle of which is that a human being is a human being because of other human beings (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*). As noted above recognising and acknowledging the essential humanity of each human being is at the core of the Black Consciousness philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that the ideal of *ubuntu* characterises the poetry inspired by this philosophy.

In “To Makanna and Nongqawuse” another poem which links the past to the present, Sepamla appeals the spirits of Makanna and Nongqawuse, well-known figures in Xhosa history, to sustain him and his people in the in this modern warfare which “demand (s) briefcases and cotton ties” :

O! spirits of my ancestors awake
I hear the whizz of bullet words
and I am felled as many times as I listen
give me the silence of your graves

O! spirits of the departed prophets
Let me meet you instead at a street corner
And from the brow of your unwrinkled face
I'll learn the secrets of this life.

(*Modern South African Poetry*, 201)

Similarly in “The Birth of Shaka”, Mtshali finds reassurance in the figure of King Shaka, a well-known African warrior-king:

His baby cry
was of a cub
tearing the neck
of the lioness

.....

The gods
boiled his blood
in a clay pot of passion
to course in his veins.

His heart was shaped into an ox shield
to foil every foe.

(Modern South African Poetry, 165)

Although Black Consciousness was clearly a phenomenon of its time it drew its inspiration, at least in part, from a common conception of traditional past which was not without its flaws, but which had been erased from the memory of 'enlightened' and 'educated' Africans who were encouraged to look up to the West for excellence. The reader is alerted some of the problems associated with a civilising discourse which demonised African traditions but failed to provide viable alternatives in Mtshali's 'Back to the Bush'. The speaker in this poem grapples with the dilemma of being an 'enlightened black man' in a country where he is prevented by legislation from demonstrating his sophistication:

I have gone back to where I came from,
and then I heard you, Father Cockerel
telling your fellow priests
that your sermons have been in vain;
'These people have hardly come out of the bush,
they are reverting to barbarism.'

That may be true, Father Cockerel,
I have definitely gone back to the bush, Father Cockerel.

What do you expect me to do, Father Cockerel?

Where am I supposed to go, Father Cockerel?

There is 'No Admittance' for me in the strip joints
that proliferate in the red light districts of cities;
I am not wanted in your nudist colonies,
I cannot even take a stroll on the 'Euro-penis Only' Clifton Beach,
because I'll see naked White women.

(Fireflames, 48)

A remarkable feature of the poetry of Black Consciousness is the way the poets dealt with the issue of gender. In poems such as 'This Old Woman', 'The Three Mothers', 'Beerhall Queen', 'The Auntie Otherside' (Serote); 'Come Duze Baby', 'Song of Mother and Child', 'The Black Girl' (Sepamla); women are shown to be key participants in the resilient and complex township culture

As shown in the few excerpts quoted above, the language, form and structure of BC poetry reflect the poets' attempts to merge the traditional oral forms with both contemporary township forms of cultural expression and modern Western poetic forms. It is important to bear in mind that some of these specifically composed for performance or recitation at political gatherings such as trade union rallies, student meetings and the meetings of community development organisations. It would be incongruous to have such poems written in complex diction and imagery as they were meant to have an immediate appeal from the audience. For this reason the most of the associated with the Black Consciousness Movement may not be carefully crafted artefacts in terms of the standard conventions of English (British Empire) poetry but clear and unambiguous and sometimes angry political statements. The language of BC poetry seeks to approximate the actual speech patterns in black residential areas and musical rhythms of jazz and blues. This is evident in the poetry of all the four major BC poets but is particularly noticeable in Sepamla's poetry where 'township English', *tsotsitaal* and standard English

are used to good effect. Of the four poets Sepamla stands out in his experimentation with the languages of the slums, the township and the rural village. His poems “Come Duze Baby” “Da Same Da Same”, “Statement `The Dodger’ all illustrate his creativity and skill in this regard. The following three stanzas from “Statement `The Dodger” illustrate Sepamla's talent splendidly:

Hayi ke mos

This world inento zawo

This fellow-ndini ndithi-speak about
Ndimqhelile, I'm used to him ngloo way
Yokumthi-see every day on the street

He comes to me one day
You know nge –same way
Ka-I'll be alright tomorrow Jack
He says ndimthi –borrow i five bob
Uzandithi fix up on Friday
Xa sithi-meet again on the way.

(Selected Poems p. 57)

Black Consciousness poets saw art in the broadest conception of both terms as a having a crucial role to play in both the psychological and physical liberation of black people in SA. As if confirming its close thematic and structural associations with other art forms such as painting, music and visual art, Black Consciousness poetry is replete with references to other art forms. Serote, Gwala and Sepamla make direct references to South African jazz musicians such as Dollar Brand, Munkunku Ngozi, Mackay Davashe and others. Mtshali's second volume contains illustrations by such artists such as Mzwakhe Mhlabatsi and Epraim Ziqubu amongst others.

As if responding to critics who expect aesthetic beauty in his poetry Serote provides a graphic explanation of the effect of content on form in his poem "Prelude" published in *Tselo* (1974) :

When i take a pen,
my soul bursts to deface the paper
pus spills –
spreads
deforming a line into the figure that violates my love,
when i take a pen,
my crimson heart oozes into the ink,
dilutes it
spreads the gem of my life
makes the word i utter gasp into the world, -
my mother, when i dance your eyes won't keep pace
look into my eyes,
there, the story of my day is told.

(Selected Poems, p 45)

In spite of its content or because of its content and its shocking imagery, Serote's poem creates its own aesthetic beauty. Essentially, the poem revolves around the difficulty the poet is having in composing 'aesthetically beautiful' poems. Black Consciousness poets were not unaware of how their unapologetically political work would be received by literary critics as Mtshali reminds us in his poem 'Literary critics' from which I quote the first and final stanzas:

Critics are enemies of the truth
and lovers of pomposity and falsity
which they parade with all the inanities of
intellectual tripe and sanctimonious sob-songs.

They write in ornate style
and pick your work with a fine tooth-comb.
But I write what I please
as I huddle in these crummy rooms
infested with rats and roaches.

(*Fireflames*, 62)

Works Cited

Barnett, Ursula. *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914-1980)*. Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1983.

Chapman, Michael. Ed. *Soweto Poetry*. Johannesburg, MacGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982.

----- *Southern African Literatures*. London and New York, 1996.

-----, *Art Talk Politics Talk*. Pietermaritzburg : University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2007.

Couzens, Tim. "Politics and Black Poetry in South Africa, 1930-1950" *Africa Perspective*. Johannesburg, No 7 (April 1978).

Cronin, Jeremy. "The Law that Says / Constricts the Breath Line" South African English Poetry Written by Blacks in the 1970s *The English Academy Review* 3, 25-30

Daymond, M J, J U Jacobs and Margaret Lenta Eds, *Momentum : On Recent South African Writing*. University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1984.

Gates Jr, Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay. Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. London & New York , W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Gordimer, Nadine, *The Black Interpreters*. Johannesburg, Sprocas / Ravan

Gwala, Mafika. 'Writing as a Cultural Weapon'

Mngxitama, Andile, Amanda Alexander and Nigel Gibson (eds). *Biko Lives ! : Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan. 2008

Mzamane, Mbulelo. *Hungry Flames and other South African Short Stories*. Essex : Longman, 1986.

----- The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture. In *Bounds of Possibility : The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*.

----- . Mtshali, Sepamla, Gwala and Serote and Other Poets of the Black Consciousness Era in South Africa, 1967 – 1984. In *Perspectives on South African English Literature*. Johannesburg, Ad Donker, 1992.

Pereyre, J. *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa*. London, Heinemann 1979.

Watts, Jane. *Black Writers from South Africa*. Macmillan, Oxford, 1989.

Van Wyk, Chris Ed *We Write What We Like*. Johannesburg : Wits University Press, 2007.

Watson, Stephen. " Shock of the Old: What's Become of Black Poetry? (1987)". In *Selected Essays 1980-1990*. Cape Town: The Carrefour Press, 1990.

Poetry Anthologies and Individual Volumes

Abrahams, Peter. *Blackman Speaks of Freedom!* Durban: Universal Printing Works, 1940.

Brink, Andre Ed, *A World of Their Own : Southern African Poets of the Seventies*. Ad. Donker, Johannesburg,

Chapman, Michael Ed, *A Century of South African Poetry*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1981.

Chapman, Michael & Achmat Dangor (Eds) *Voices from Within : Black Poetry from Southern Africa*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1982.

_____. *South African English Poetry A Modern Perspective*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1984.

Couzens, Tim & Essop Patel, eds *The Return of the Amasi Bird : Black South African Poetry 1891-1981*. Johannesburg : Ravan Press., 1982.

Gray, Stephen ed *A World of Their Own : South African Poets of the Seventies*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1976.

Matthews, James ed *Black Voices Shout ! An Anthology of Poetry*. Athlone : Blac Publishers, 1974.

Mongane Serote. *Yakhal'inkomo*. Johannesburg : Renoster books, Ad. Donker, 1972.

----- 1974 *Tselo*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1974.

----- 1975 . *No Baby Must Weep*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1974.

----- 1978. *Behold Mama, Flowers*. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker. 1978

Mafika Gwala. *Jolinkomo*. Johannesburg : Ad. Donker, 1977.

----- . *No More Lulabies* Johannesburg Ad. Donker, 1983.

Mzamane, Mbulelo, Vizikhungo. Ed *Sipho Sepamla Selected Poems*. Johannesburg :
AD Donker, 1984.

----- . Ed. *Mongane Wally Serote : Selected Poems*. Johannesburg :
Ad Donker. 1982.

Mtshali, Oswald Mbuyiseni. *Sounds of A Cowhide Drum*. Johannesburg: Renoster
Books, 1971; Ad Donker, 1982.

----- . *Fireflames*. Pietermaritzburg : Shuter & Shooter, 1980.

Sipho Sepamla *Hurry Up to It !* Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1975.

----- . *The Blues Is You in Me*. Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1976.

----- . *The Soweto I Love*. Cape Town, 1977.

----- *Children of the Earth*. Johannesburg : 1983.

----- . *From Gore to Soweto*. Johannesburg, 1988.

Royston, Robert (ed) *To Whom It May Concern: black Poetry from South Africa*.
Johannesburg : Ad Donker, 1973.