Creativity after apartheid
Zakes Mda

There has been great concern from that sector of the world community that has keenly followed artistic developments in South Africa that the death of apartheid would herald the death of creativity in the country. Apartheid had been so much of a dominant discourse in the lives of South Africans, and therefore in their production and enjoyment of art, that there were fears that with the horrendous system consigned to the graveyard of all evil social engineering experiments, cultural life in the country would be marked by utter silence. When the system was in the throes of its demise it was not unusual for writers like myself to field such questions as “Now that apartheid is dead, what are you going to write about?” I must add that these questions did not only come from Europe and America. Even in South Africa, that question was asked quite often by literary commentators, critics and reviewers.

At first the question used to offend me. Didn't those asking know that writers the world over draw their material from society, and that the death of apartheid did not usher in the death of society in South Africa? Were those asking not aware that writers are informed by discourse in society and that if they are influential enough, they may inform discourse in society, in a symbiotic relationship? And that the death of apartheid did not result in the death of discourse or in the death of social and individual tensions? Apartheid was the dominant discourse during that period, throughout the country and amongst all sectors of the population because it touched every aspect of everyone's life – for better or for worse – but should it therefore be the dominant discourse in the works of art created during that period? Did that escape those asking the question?

The question stopped irritating me once I realised that the discourses of our apartheid past did, for some time, result in dysfunctional notions of artistic creation, and that in many instances the cultural activist of the past might need rehabilitation in a free South Africa. Although society, particularly civil society, has been strengthened and empowered with all the basic freedoms and the new dispensation prides itself on a multiplicity of voices, some of which were previously silenced, the insidious effects of the creative processes of the past can still be felt. Apartheid did not go alone; it took with it a number of our prominent artists whose ghostly voices now only echo in the dimmest of national memories.

The past was rich with narratives that were breathtaking in their horror and absurdity. It was possible to take a walk in the bustling streets of Johannesburg, or in some township on the outskirts of the city, only to be confronted by an absurd situation that demanded to be recorded. Our artists became mere recorders of an art of witnessing and documentary representation. This slice-of-life art did not demand much from the artist. It was enough to possess the skill of recording the real-life drama that was unfolding in the streets, where police arrested those blacks who did not have their passbooks with them; in the houses, in the deep of night when the torches of the law shone in the faces of startled sleepers, demanding to know who did or did not have the right to be sleeping in the city instead of the designated homeland that night, or examining the sleepers’ sexual habits to ensure that those who were blessed with little melanin in their bodies did not engage in carnal romps with those who were cursed with dollops of melanin; in the interrogation centres, where detainees were tortured to extract confessions; in remote farms, where the bodies of those murdered by the secret police were incinerated; or on the streets where the youths were playing out a revolution that culminated in our present-day liberation. All these were ready-made stories that were there for the taking. They were narratives authored by the greatest author of them all – apartheid!

Theatre directors like Barney Simon sent the actors out to the townships to observe life. The following day they came back and related their experiences and the experiences of those they observed, and created their award-winning dramas about the horrors and absurdities of apartheid. Novelists like Sipho Sipamla and Miriam Tladi wrote their eye-witness novels that portrayed the horrors in more a direct way. Artists painted their pictures of tortured souls, contorted figures in chains. It was a literal art that spoke immediately to the oppressed without the need to interpret complex symbols and codes. Its demands on imagination were minimal. Who needed imagination when apartheid continued to create the most imaginative stories in
abundance on a daily basis?

I do not wish to suggest that there was anything amiss in us as artists drawing our narratives from society. As I have mentioned, that is the practice of all artists the world over. The uniqueness of the South African situation was in the absurdity of the narratives created by the political system, to the extent that it deprived the artist of the God-given right to use his or her imagination. Previously fertile imaginations became lazy and finally went to sleep as their work was usurped by apartheid. Another singularity was that life under apartheid defined for itself the binaries of good and evil – black and white in a figurative and a racial sense, without any shades of grey, or without the ambiguities that are essential in any artistic expression that is not formulaic.

Besides the fact that apartheid’s authorization created narratives that were there for the taking, the artists themselves were committed to an art that would have a mobilizational force, even if it offered the oppressed no insights about their oppression. Like all sectors of society in South Africa, the artist was part of the liberation struggle – sometimes even more so than professionals in other sectors.

And then the author died, so very unexpectedly and so suddenly, when many of us were gearing ourselves for a protracted struggle. There was a lull in creativity while artists struggled to find a new voice. For a year or so revivals became the order of the day on our professional theatre stages. The debilitating effects of the death of apartheid were felt even by those artists who had established a wide and commercially lucrative international reputation. Recently I quoted\(^1\) Athol Fugard as complaining that after the democratic transition he felt that he had outlived his usefulness. He felt redundant, because his had been a voice that had plugged into the conflicts of the old South Africa. “I can't deny that,” he said. “Those conflicts – those rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts – were a very energizing factor in my writing.”\(^2\)

After a long struggle Fugard says he was able to rescue himself from the wilderness of redundancy by redeeming his essential identity, that of a storyteller rather than a politician. Apparently with the new dispensation he has decided to leave politics to the politicians. His play, *Sorrows and Rejoicings*, has been doing the rounds in Cape Town and Pretoria. Yet its reception has not been as resounding as his earlier overtly political work.

Whereas we have that group of artists that died with apartheid, we do have some of our old artists who are able to re-engage our reality with a different attitude and using different modes. An artistically rejuvenated Andre Brink continues to produce a new novel every year, and this year his latest book, *The Other Side of Silence* – which tells a harrowing tale about a neglected and abused orphan who escapes from her native Bremen in Germany to German South West Africa, as Namibia was formerly called, where she finds love and hope until she is brutally assaulted for spurning the advances of an army officer – won the Commonwealth Award for the Africa Region. Amongst the veterans of South African letters we have new works by Lewis Nkosi, who broke his long silence and came up with *Underground People*, described as a political thriller and a sophisticated human drama that exposes the underside of a fictional revolutionary movement in the last years of apartheid; we have new work by the traditional healer, sangoma (diviner) and former member of parliament, Wally Serote; and we also have Mandla Langa who is a very productive writer despite his hectic schedule as the chairman of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa.

Another veteran, in the theatre world this time, is John Kani. He has previously won a number of awards as an actor, including the prestigious Tony Award on Broadway. Recently he made his

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debuted as a playwright with *Nothing but the Truth*, whose world premiere at the National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown was hailed by critics variously as one of the greatest days in South African theatre history and a pivotal cultural moment. It is a deeply political play, which explores, amongst others, issues of reconciliation, memory and identity, with humour, subtlety and depth. It is steeped in hardcore realism, but Kani's realism is complex in its exploration of the psychology of his characters.

But what fascinates me most in South Africa is the rise of the new artists who have only emerged after apartheid. They have therefore not been contaminated by apartheid's creative processes. They are found in all areas of the arts, and their detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this lecture. They are found amongst theatre practitioners who are engaging the new reality in experimental, traditional, comic, magical and other kinds of modes. They are keen on mastering form and technique, since now the focus is no longer on uttering the right statements or on being politically correct. The demise of apartheid has freed their imaginations to the extent that now they are able to address any other conflicts that beset society. And sometimes they address no issues at all and create an escapist theatre for entertainment's sake. That is part of the freedom of creativity in South Africa.

It is the same freedom that is enjoyed by young filmmakers such as Zola Maseko, Khalo Matabane, Dumisani Phakathi and Teboho Mahlatsi, who are developing a new South African filmic language both for the big screen and television. It is also the freedom that is enjoyed by the new kwaito generation of musicians such as Bongo Maffin, Mandoza and Mafikizolo who have developed a new genre that has potential to make an indelible mark in the world of music; and the new wave dancers such as Vincent Mantsoe, Gregory Maqoma and Robyn Orlin whose interpretative movements brings back to South Africa many international awards. And of course there are visual artists such as Samson Mnisi who has been praised for his complex visual vocabulary in his mixed-media constructions of reeds, cloths, pigments, herbs and found objects; and Thabiso Phokompe whose conceptual and site-specific work of natural fibres and earth (representing the womb from which life flows) is influenced by both African concepts and international trends. Phokompe recently had a successful solo debut in New York and both he and Mnisi were part of the American tour called Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa.

Amongst writers, an area on which this lecture is meant to focus, we have a new development where young people are writing novels. During apartheid the novel was not really the genre of the black writer. Apart from the early novels by writers like Sol Plaatje and Peter Abrahams, the early short novels in the indigenous African languages, and then later by writers like Miriam Tladi and Sipho Sipamla, the African writer in South Africa focused more on poetry, short stories and plays. These genres were more immediate, and poetry and theatre communicated with the audiences directly. The black writer was in a hurry to pass on the message and did not have the luxury or the patience to sit down and spend solitary months working on a single text. It was the period of the liberation struggle and cultural expression was a weapon.

There has never been such a flurry of novels from black writers in the history of South African literature as we are seeing today. I have already mentioned the old stalwarts who have produced new work in the past year or so. There are the writers of the middle generation – my generation, that is – such as Sindiwe Magona, Chris van Wyk, Achmat Dangor, Gomolemo Mokae. Then there are exciting new writers of the post-apartheid generation. The three who have fascinated me most are K. Sello Duiker, Phaswane Mpe and Johnny Masilela. Duiker's first novel on street kids in Cape Town, *Thirteen Cents*, won the debut award of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa Region, and his latest novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, focuses on a young man's struggle with his sexuality. It deals with mental illness and homosexuality – fresh issues that used to be taboo and were never addressed by literature created during the apartheid era. Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is set in the melting pot of the city of Johannesburg and uses very lyrical language to portray decay, xenophobia, frustrated hopes, AIDS and issues of urban/rural divide. Masilela's *We Shall Not Weep* is a tale of a rural Ndebele family obliged to move to a township, first by forces of nature such as searing droughts and secondly by forces of modernity and political change.
These writers are able to address any issue without fear of censorship, which would not have been the case during apartheid. My case as a writer is an example of the freedom that the artist enjoys in South Africa today. In my writing I have pulled no punches in my criticism of the government of the day. In my novels I have written about the ills of corruption and of the patronage system in the new dispensation. Yet, unlike Ngugi wa Thiongo of Kenya and Wole Soyinka of Nigeria who have had to languish in jail and in exile for decades because of their writings, I am celebrated by my country and my government. Cabinet ministers quote my works in parliament or in speeches that they make abroad. My book launches are graced by the presence of the Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, and in one instance – at a joint launch with other writers – by President Thabo Mbeki. These are the signs of political maturity and the joys of freedom.

This brings me to my own experience as a creative writer in the post-apartheid era. I do not see my role as having changed under the new dispensation. I continue to be a storyteller and a social critic – an entertainer, an uplifter and a teacher. Unlike Athol Fugard I did not have to rescue myself from any wilderness. I started my writing more than thirty years ago in exile. Yet I was writing about South Africa. Unlike Barney Simon and his actors I could not go to the township to get a slice of real life, to capture the nuances of the language, to observe people for my own characterization, and then come back to transpose all that onto the page or the stage. I envied them from afar, since their voice sounded more authentic to my ears. I could not claim any pretensions to such authenticity. I had to depend solely on extended metaphor and allegory and other modes that were far removed from documentary representation. I had to use my imagination, a habit that has come in quite handy in this post-apartheid era where apartheid authorization is dead.

In 1994, I was teaching at the University of Vermont in the United States of America when I received an invitation from the University of the Witwatersand in Johannesburg to be a Visiting Professor at their School of Drama. I was only supposed to be there for one academic year, but I was so overwhelmed by the wealth of stories in the new South Africa that I decided to buy a house in Johannesburg and write full time. My first and second novels had just come out almost simultaneously. Before that, over the years, I had published a number of books, mostly anthologies of plays and one academic book on the utilization of theatre as a medium of development communication.

Not once have I regretted the decision to work as a full-time writer, because the last seven years have been the most productive in my life in as far as creative work is concerned. I have written five novels which have been variously translated into French, Spanish, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish. They have also won a number of awards, the most recent being the Commonwealth Writers Prize for The Heart of Redness in the year 2001. The Heart of Redness, which is my fourth novel, and my first novel titled Ways of Dying (available in Spanish as Formas de Morir) were introduced for the first time to American readers last August by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and Picador respectively, and have enjoyed a resounding reception.3

Ways of Dying, which has already been adapted into a play and an opera in South Africa, is now in the process of being made into a motion picture by a United Kingdom-based company and a Broadway play by Michael Lessac, producer of the motion picture House of Cards.

I have a new novel, The Madonna of Excelsior, which was published last August in South Africa and will be published in the United States towards the end of this year.

I might mention that since last August I have returned to the classroom as a Professor of Creative Writing and World Literature at my alma mater, Ohio University; hence the academic

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tone in parts of this paper, in spite of myself. I decided that now I have reached a stage where I have established myself enough as a writer to be able to balance my creative work on one hand, and my academic work – which has always been one of my major loves – on the other. I am fortunate enough to be able to commute between the United States and South Africa, where I am spending four months of the year writing, tending to my beekeeping project in the Eastern Cape and my multimedia HIV/AIDS project in Johannesburg.

As far as my writing and my scholarship are concerned my main interest lies in oral literature (or orature) and its continuity in the African novel. My association with writers from other African countries, India and Latin America led me to the exploration of magical realism. There are really two types of magical realism. Wendy B. Faris, a North American scholar of the mode, makes a distinction between a “tropical lush and a northerly spare variety” of the mode, or “programmatic magic” and “pervasive magic”. It is the same distinction, she says, that is made by Jean Weisgerber between “two types of magical realism: the ‘scholarly’ type, which ‘loses itself in art and conjecture to illuminate or construct a speculative universe’ and which is mainly the province of European writers, and the mythical or folkloric type, mainly found in Latin America.”

Africa's magical realism, I must add, is of the latter variety – the tropical lush, the pervasive, the mythic and the folkloric. It is for this reason that one of the major resources of Gabriel García Márquez, according to his own account, is the oral tradition of the African slaves. Using the poetics of defamiliarization to the extreme, this second type of magical realism draws deeply from orature: ancient systems of belief often underlie these texts. Perhaps that is why this magical realism has tended to concentrate on rural settings and to rely on rural inspirations, becoming a kind of post-modern pastoralism. It has been my interest, then, to examine the African novel in terms of the second type. I have been fascinated by the carnivalesque spirit that pervades some of these novels, the anti-bureaucratic stances that these texts take, their self-reflexiveness (foregrounding of metafictional concerns), and generally the manner in which these texts defy accepted notions of time and space.

The general notions of African literature that prevail in the academy are those of the documentary discourse of socialist and historical realism. When orature is used, as is the case in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, it is in a narrative that is limited by its rational ordering of experiences, representations and symbols. In this instance orature is never a vehicle of narration. It becomes an incident in narration. Yet the antecedents of this literature, as evidenced by two of Thomas Mofolo's novels – *Moeti oa Bochabela* (*The Traveller of the East*), published in 1907 and *Chaka*, written in 1909 but published in 1925, have strong elements of the magical. Both novels are written in the Sesotho language, but *Chaka* has since been translated into many languages, including English. Nigerian novelist Amos Tutuola, who wrote in English soon after World War II but was first published in 1952, resorted in his work to fabulations, dream-visions and magical transformations and illusions, in the manner of today's magical realists.

The work of these early African writers took a calculated risk to be disconcertingly irrational and subjective, in some instances disorderly and uncontrolled, excessive and spontaneous – all of which are wonderful elements of today's magical realism. The writers chose strangeness and defamiliarization over familiarity and recognition, many decades before magical realism became the ascendant mode in about 1975.

I come to magical realism not only through scholarship, but through practice. My mode of writing has been referred to as magical realism by critics, though initially I never set out to write magical realism. Until as recently as 1992, when I introduced myself to the work of Gabriel

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García Márquez, I had never even heard of it. But for the past forty years I have been writing in this mode. My very first short story, which was published in 1963 in the isiXhosa language, had strong elements of the magical. In *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, a play I wrote when I was at high school, and which continues to be performed every year in southern Africa today, the supernatural exists side-by-side with objective reality.

How did I write in this mode then, without external influences? My writing draws from the oral traditions of the peoples of southern Africa. I come from a culture of storytelling. In all our stories – those that are told by grandmothers and those that we tell among ourselves – the magical happens as part of the real. And indeed this magic seems to grow imperceptibly out of the real. I remember in one story, a particularly ugly character with a gravel voice swallows a red-hot axe in order to make his voice mellifluous. And it works! He becomes the sweetest singer of all time and uses his voice for evil purposes. We never questioned how it was possible for anyone to swallow an axe, let alone a red-hot one. Such stories are told in a matter-of-fact manner, the unreal happening as part of reality and accepted as normal. And these were not just children's stories in the manner of the fairytales of the western world. Both adults and children actively participated in their production and enjoyment for they functioned at different levels. Neither adults nor children found the supernatural in them, or the strange and the unusual, disconcerting. It was never a matter of conjecture or speculation. These were narratives produced by cultures that did not recognize a clear line of demarcation between the supernatural and what Westerners may refer to as empirical reality. The fluid boundaries between the magical and the real, the living and the dead, are reflected in the rituals that are still observed to honour the dead, to communicate with them and to exchange presents with them.

After many years of writing plays, I wrote my first novel in 1992, when I was a Research Fellow at Yale University. I had spent the previous year in Durham, England, as a writer-in-residence at St Chad's College. My brief was to write a play that would be performed as part of the festivities to celebrate the 900th anniversary of the awe-inspiring Durham Cathedral in 1993. During my idle moments at Durham I had created a strange character, Toloki the Professional Mourner, who then became the main character in *Ways of Dying*, the novel I was writing at Yale. It occurred to me that the way of the oral tradition of the world from which my characters are drawn would be most effective in depicting and interpreting their world.

To what end do I use these pre-colonial forms of literature (that are nevertheless extant) in my work? I use them to deal with the question of memory; not memory for its own sake, but to illustrate that the past is, as Nadine Gordimer states in the blurb of one of my novels, a powerful presence in the present; memory as the formulator and determiner of our identities.

More than anything else, for me as a writer, painter, composer and filmmaker, the demise of apartheid has led to a renewed delight in the ordinariness of life.