



A World where “the wetness of tears or the dryness of words holds no meaning”: Two Stories of Incarceration



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ABSTRACT

R. Singh's Thirteen Years (1991) narrates the events and situations during his period of incarceration in different prisons. In his book there are discussions of revolutionary activities with which he was involved and also some of the ideological issues relevant to it. The memoir, however, does not mechanically portray the theoretical underpinning of Singh's activism; it has the elements of humour and pathos associated with the lives inside and outside the penitentiary. Caesarina Kona Makhoere's No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid (1988) is a South African prison narrative that demands of the reader

specific kinds of attention in relation to the politics and ethics of reading. The rhetorical strategy aims to elicit a response from the reader who finds himself / herself standing beside the rebels while reading a South African narrative that heralds the feminist virtues of love, affection and forgiveness.

KEYWORDS

Prison narrative, trauma, memoir, South Africa, Apartheid

RESEARCH PAPER

R. Singh's *Thirteen Years* (1991) narrates the events and situations during his period of incarceration in different prisons. In his book there are discussions of revolutionary activities with which he was involved and also some of the ideological issues relevant to it. The memoir, however, does not mechanically portray the theoretical underpinning of Singh's activism; it has the elements of humour and pathos associated with the lives inside and outside the penitentiary. Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988) is a South African prison narrative that demands of the reader specific kinds of attention in relation to the politics and ethics of reading. The rhetorical strategy aims to elicit a response from the reader who finds himself / herself standing beside the rebels while reading a South African narrative that heralds the feminist virtues of love, affection and forgiveness.

It was the morning of June 16, 1976. Thousands of students from the African township of Soweto, outside Johannesburg, congregated at their schools. They wanted to partake in a protest rally which was organised by the students. Many of them hold signs that read "Down with Afrikaans" and "Bantu Education – to Hell with it." Others sang freedom songs. The unarmed multitude of schoolchildren walked to Orlando soccer stadium. A peaceful demonstration had been planned there. The security forces attempted in vain to scatter the students with warning shots and tear gas. Then policemen shoot directly into the throng of marchers. Two students, Hastings Ndlovu (15) and Hector Pieterse (12), died. Many students were running for shelter. Others retaliated by pelting the police with stones. Government security forces were furnished with armoured tanks and live ammunition. They gushed into Soweto with the directive to shoot to kill, for the sake of "law and order."

The barrage of bullets in Soweto incited a massive uprising. Different government offices were targeted. They were burned down. Government buildings were seen as symbols of oppression. Same fate was faced by government stores, alcohol shops, and beer halls. In the Cape, Coloured and African high school students expressed solidarity with students in Soweto. Black students at the University of the Western Cape boycotted their classes. They clashed with

police and university authorities. Demonstrations took place in residential schools in villages. It took place also in Black University campuses all over the country. All these began as a local demonstration against the Afrikaans language decree. But it immediately developed into a countrywide youth uprising. The result was a rebellion against apartheid oppression.

The Soweto uprising had in its backdrop a series of resistance forces incubated. The formation of South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in 1969 by Black students led by Steve Biko was one of them. The strengthening of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s was another significant development during this period. It stressed Black pride, self-reliance, and psychological liberation especially from dominant "white" values. It also became an influential force during Soweto. The political context of the 1976 uprisings must also take into consideration the effects of workers' strikes in Durban in 1973. The liberation of neighbouring Angola and Mozambique in 1975 motivated the revolutionaries. In Black schools student enrolment increased. It led to the emergence of a new collective youth identity forged by common experiences and grievances. Teachers who refused to implement the Afrikaans language policy were fired. This event aggravated the frustration of middle school students. They, then, organised small demonstrations and class boycotts as early as March, April and May. To sustain resistance, leaders of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC, founded in August 1976) took some important decision. They chose to include adults also in the protests. The target was to develop an inter-generational unity. Moreover, they felt a need to strike an economic blow against apartheid. From August through December 1976, SSRC leaders arranged a number of campaigns. These included stay-at-homes (short strikes) for adult workers, protest rallies to Johannesburg, anti-drinking campaigns, mass funerals (which became politically charged and often turned into demonstrations), and a Christmas consumer boycott. Random conflicts between students and police continued in 1977. A number of Black South Africans either fled into exile or joined with the armed struggle.

In his address to the African Writers' Conference of 1986 Wally Serote stated what should be the aim of a writer under apartheid. Serote said that the goal of such a writer should be to produce work that would:

record the story of the people of South Africa, to portray the people of this country, to contribute to the betterment of their lives, to inspire these same people to reach their aspirations, and to give lasting, sustaining hope, so that their lives can be ruled by optimism.¹

In turbulent political situation, thus, words perform a political function and a duty to accomplish. Lewis Nkosi, who was most vocal on this concern over a number of years, has made it clear:

sometimes words by writers help to bring into clear focus feelings of frustration and resentment which have long remained inchoate and unfocused for the general mass of the public. It is by embodying the unspoken thoughts and emotions of their people that writers and poets perform a national duty.²

The revolutionary potential that literature may contain is an aspect that could not pass unobserved by the apartheid regime. It has been reported that by 1969 the South African government had banned some 13,000 books.³ Posters advertising those American films that show Black and white people together used to be altered regularly by the government. During apartheid regime politically active authors and poets were banished or banned. Nat Nakasa, Arthur Nortje, Dennis Brutus and Lewis Nkosi were, among others, forced to run away from their motherland. Some of them carried on writing about a remembered South Africa. Others like Nakasa and Nortje could not put up with the alienation resulted from exile. They committed suicide. It was possibly because they felt powerless since they could not be in their own land to fight against the oppressor.

And it is this sense of urgency that immediately puts on Makhoere's text a label of the *testimonio*. A testimonial text has been described as "a 'narración de urgencia' – an 'emergency' narrative - involving a problem of repression, poverty, marginality, exploitation, or simply

¹ Wally Serote, "Power to the People: A Glory to Creativity," in *Criticism and Ideology*, ed. K.H. Peterson (Uppsala: N.A. Institute, 1988), 194 <books.google.co.in/books?id=Qsn0w2xM4Kyc&pg=PA194>.

² Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, (London: Longman, 1983), 94 quoted in Nahem Yousaf, "Apartheid Narratives," in *Apartheid Narratives*. ed. Nahem Yousaf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), x.

³ Nahem Yousaf, "Apartheid Narratives," in *Apartheid Narratives*. ed. Nahem Yousaf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), x.

survival in the act of narration itself.”⁴ Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s *No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988) is a desperate articulation of the reticence of women in South African Black communities. It, at the same time, shows the link between the public and the private experiences of trauma. The narrative was written when Makhoere was in her early thirties. Here she speaks, with the voice of a new generation, the events of her joining the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC), and her commitment to armed resistance against the racist government. The Soweto uprising in 1976, her resolution to become a member of the ANC and to seek armed training, her subsequent arrest and six years in prison - all finds expression with a voice - young, strident, militant - filled with pain and defiance: “We had to adopt armed struggle”;⁵ “They have left us no alternative but to fight.”⁶

Makhoere was born in 1955. It was 41 years after Ellen Kuzwayo (the writer of *Call Me Woman*) and 26 years after Emma Mashinini (*Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*). Makhoere makes the readers leap forward in time with the arrival of the “future.” South Africa has become an armed camp. School children are being imprisoned. They are gunned down on the roads. Makhoere too decides to tell her story not long after being in prison but from a position of vulnerability. She has been newly released from prison. Her name has been placed on a death-squad hit list. She has been forced into hiding. She was held in prison for a long period—six years—and at a very young age: 21-27. Perhaps it is also a reason why Makhoere writes very little about her early years in Mamelodi: “In a family of seven children I was the fourth, with four brothers and two sisters.”⁷ Makhoere’s father was a policeman, respected in the neighbourhood. He was not interested in politics. Her mother worked as a domestic servant for a white family. On every second Sunday she had one day off. As children, records Makhoere, “We had to look after ourselves.”⁸

⁴ R. Jara, “Prologo,” in *Testimonio Y Literatura*, ed. R. Jara and H. Vidal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986), 3 quoted in John Beverley, “Testimonio, Subalternity and Narrative Authority,” in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 572.

⁵ Makhoere, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Makhoere's studies in school were interrupted when at age of sixteen she became pregnant. She gave birth to a son. She was back in school at the age of seventeen with a young child at home in the care of her mother. It was the decade of the seventies. The Soweto student uprising against Bantu education swept through the townships of South Africa. The movement was catalysed by the newly won independence in neighbouring Angola and Mozambique. During the next quite a few years, Makhoere attended Vlakfontein Technical High School. There the two-thirds of the teaching staff were white soldiers of the South African Defence Force (SADF). The principal and his deputy too were its member. Virulent racism was rampant. Amenities were segregated. The students were called "apes" by one of their teachers who were co-opted into the Bantu education system as instruments of the regime's racist policies.

In early 1976, as detailed earlier, the white authorities dictated that classes throughout South Africa were to be conducted in the Afrikaans language. In June of that year came the event of Soweto. Police opened fire on young people demonstrating peacefully in the town to protest the new policy. Dozens were shot down. Makhoere describes that in her school, "all hell broke loose."⁹ When students congregated in the school compound police arrived all of a sudden and killed and injured a number of them. Makhoere felt it incredible when she saw that the principal and vice-principal picked up the fallen students and handed them over to the police. The event was followed by riots, shutting down of schools, and arrest, locking up, and killing of hundreds of young people throughout the country.

This was the turning point for Makhoere, a student activist in Mamelodi. She felt that the only alternative before her was to "end violence by violence, period."¹⁰ She realises that one cannot fight bullets with stones; and became a member of *Umkhonto We Sizwe* (The Spear of the Nation). Known as "MK", it was the military wing of the ANC. With a number of her classmates, Makhoere sought guerrilla training. But her plans fell through when one in the group reported to authorities. She was compelled to take cover. Makhoere unperturbedly reveals before her readers that it was her own father who led the police to her hiding place with her relatives.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

Makhoere was arrested as an “agitator” on October 25, 1976 under the Terrorism Act. She was apprehended in solitary confinement for ten months in the Silverton Police Station in Mamelodi while waiting for her trial. When she was taken into custody she was only 21, a spinster mother, an apparently innocent schoolgirl like hundreds of others striving to get an education under the poorest of situations.

On October 27, 1977 Makhoere was condemned of “recruiting people for military training.”¹¹ She then spent two years in Kroonstad Prison, two years in Pretoria Central Prison and one year in Klerksdorp before her release in October 1982. Her narrative *No Child's Play* deals primarily with these six years in penitentiary. It describes in graphic detail how she, with other Black women, managed both to survive and to fight back against racial discrimination as practised in jails. But the wider perspective, as will be seen, is of course their shared experience and consciousness with which they endeavoured to crush the apartheid system outside prison as well. The solidarity of the power struggle against the institutionalised racial discrimination is reflected in her narrative that demonstrates the strength of a collective resistance.

Makhoere emerges from penitentiary into an apparently frenetic world. A psychiatrist went to Makhoere while she was in custody. Makhoere scornfully says that, rather than tend to her needs, “a psychiatrist might be more useful in treating the mad apartheid dogs.”¹² Soon Makhoere had to go into hiding. It was because the South African government had declared a state of emergency. Makhoere had learned that her name had appeared on the death squad hit list. She saw her South Africa as a land enmeshed in deeply ensconced patterns of racial hatred and ignorance. She found it locked in a power struggle that had been ongoing throughout the century with violence at its dead centre. Nevertheless, a significant part of Makhoere’s response to this world is her narrative. She considers it as another way to work for understanding between disparate peoples. But there is another implication behind her narrating the stories of movement and struggle to claim and establish racial identity. She does so not as an alternative to armed resistance but rather as its complementary. Moreover she does it in a land so committed to

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid., 243.

silencing Black people, and above all women. All these aspects make Makhoere's narrating venture a daring, risky and powerful way to bring about change.

R. Singh describes:

...two different approaches were adopted towards comrades imprisoned for long periods or on life imprisonment. One, the members outside might adopt the policy that the dead and those incarcerated for long periods were no longer the responsibility of the Party. Alternatively, their imprisonment may be treated as part of the revolutionary process, and the imprisoned comrades kept abreast of the latest political happenings and included in discussions on major issues. (p. 134)