

What the Revolutionary Oracle Taught me

By Fred Khumalo

FIFTH MAFIKA GWALA MEMORIAL LECTURE:

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I

Sanibonani. Good evening. First and foremost: I want to thank my old friend and one of my idols Omar Badsha for the magical honour of giving this talk today. Thank you, also, to the University of KwaZulu Natal and the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences for their continued support of this very important venture. Thank you, too, to the behind-the-scenes heroes and heroines who helped with the logistics to make this presentation a reality. And, as we say in South African parlance, all protocols observed.

It is with trepidation and much humility that I give this, the Fifth Mafika Gwala Memorial Lecture. This is especially because literary hard-hitters such as Mandla Langa and Ari Sitas have walked this path before, have very eloquently paid tribute to Mphephethwa. As a result, my voice will sound like the squeak of a mouse by comparison. But I must say what I have to say.

After 11 published books and almost 30 years in journalism, I have never adequately paid tribute to the man who, for better or worse, got me started on my writing journey. But rather than reducing it into a personal hagiography, I thought I should make this a talk that locates Gwala within the broader society. Mainly what he saw as the role of the writer, or the artist in society.

I was in standard nine when I was first introduced to Mr. Gwala. My English teacher, Mr. Fole Mungwe, who'd seen some of the scribblings, thought I was destined to be a writer. Which is why he arranged for me to meet Mr. Gwala. On the appointed day, however, Mr. Mungwe was not there. It was just Mr. Gwala and me. The great poet took a cursory look at my scribblings and suppressed a giggle. Then he was serious all over again. He said: "What is a dale? What is a promontory? What is a knoll?"

He was asking me these questions in staccato fashion. Before I could respond he said: "You don't know these things, yet you've put them in your scribblings." Pause. "You must write what you know. I want to see you next week. I want you to write me a poem about Doris."

Doris, by the way, was not a woman. He was a colourful character who worked as a marshal at the local taxi rank. But he also was famous for telling

stories. He moved from shebeen to shebeen telling stories and jokes in exchange for a sip of beer here, a nip of brandy there.

I was shocked and disgusted that this great man of letters expected me to write a poem about a dirty drunk. I was an aspiring poet, for crying out loud, someone already toying with high sounding concepts and thoughts. somebody toying with Marxism, and socialism and other isms. Why should I reduce myself to the gutters of my township?

Before I left his house, as an afterthought perhaps, Mr. Gwala (I still called him Bab’Gwala back then) gave me a plastic bag bursting with books. When I got home I was startled by the names of the authors: James Baldwin (Go Tell It On the Mountain), Buchi Emecheta (Second-class Citizen), Norman Mailer (Deer Hunter) and others. Needless to say, the books did not make much sense to me at the time. My facility in the English language was still rudimentary.

It would take me years to make sense of James Baldwin. Then the penny dropped: Baldwin wrote about the black community of Harlem where he grew up. He wrote about fast-talking thugs and shady preachers; about prostitutes and about honest-to-God family men. He wrote about what he knew.

By the time I finished matric, my fate was sealed. Gwala had explained to me in detail how the writing game worked. You don’t just become a writer. You

have to live, before you can write. The best entry point into the writing game, he suggested to me, was to start out as a journalist. Indeed, after matric, I enrolled at Technikon Natal for a national diploma in journalism. By that time I had read hundreds of books, thanks to Mafika. My English had improved. I could now debate with him and members of the Mpumalanga Arts Ensemble which he had started back in the late 1970s. I was the youngest member in the group that included the likes of Senzo Malinga (now a top academic), Nkathazo Mnyayiza, Conrad Mhlongo, Welcome Sithebe, and others.

What I immediately got to understand about Mr Gwala was that to him writing and political activism were the two sides of the same coin. The yin and the yang. As he would later tell Thengamehlo Ngwenya in an interview for Staffrider, to him, literature was not “the refrigerated food for the intelligentsia”. Literature had to transcend class. It was a celebration of life. It might sound clichéd now, but in Gwala’s hands, literature (his poetry and essays) was a weapon, a tool to carve a future for his people.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus suffered incarceration on the great rock of Tartarus because he stole fire from the Gods to give to humanity. In my book, Gwala was the contemporary incarnation of Prometheus. He stole fire from the gods of academia, the gods of literature, the gods of intelligentsia, to give to humanity. Those of us who grew up reading Staffrider magazine were the

recipients of that fire. His flames of righteousness, passed on to us through his essays and poems in Staffrider, woke us up from our intellectual slumber. Through his input, and that of his contemporaries such as Mbulelo Mzamane, Wally Serote, Njabulo Ndebele, the cobwebs of ignorance were removed from our eyes. Having swallowed the flames of commitment that he infused in us, we were reborn. We walked with a new sense of purpose. We picked up our pens with a new-found confidence and sense of purpose. And with that fiery determination we used our pens as weapons, while others resorted to machine guns and bombs. I shall revisit this imagery later in my talk: the dichotomy of the written word versus the gun.

I was born in 1966, six years after the Sharpeville Massacre. Which is to say I was 10 years old when Soweto exploded on June 16, 1976. In other words, I was 20 when the first State of Emergency was declared in 1986. In the same year of uncertainty and confusion, I got published for the first time professionally. The delicious irony is that my first professional piece of writing was published in a magazine called *Cosmopolitan*. Let the record show that said publication was a glossy magazine targeted at well-heeled white South African women.

Cosmopolitan. The dictionary definition of cosmopolitan reads as follows: “having an exciting and glamorous character associated with travel and a mixture of cultures”. Now, back then I was far from being cosmopolitan. I had never travelled beyond the borders of my province of birth. In hindsight, I can now see that the

magazine's name was a mockery, albeit unwitting, of my very existence. A picture of myself appeared cheek by jowl with that of white women with whom I couldn't fraternise in real life; alongside whom I could not live, thanks to the Group Areas Act which was still active at the time. But all these things were not major concerns for me at the time. For crying out loud, I was only 19 when I got published in *Cosmopolitan*. I had no choice but to celebrate the appearance of my opinion piece in the magazine meant for the Madams. And for that one piece they paid me enough money to cover my tuition fees for one semester. My comrades were not sure if this was an occasion for celebration or mourning. I had crossed the line that burned ferociously, unseen, between US and THEM.

The publication of the piece did not go down well with some of my friends and comrades. They started talking about "liberals in our ranks" whenever I was around. The word "liberal" was the worst insult you could throw at a fellow comrade back then. It was almost the same as "informer" or "impimpi.

Anyway, perhaps out of guilt at being published in *Cosmopolitan*, and more specifically to prove that I was not a liberal, I volunteered to go for what we called military training. This was nothing but a grandiloquent way of saying that one was going to be taught how to make petrol bombs and shoot a firearm. Later, with a two-week training course under my belt, I hurled a petrol bomb or two at some forgotten and forgettable targets, fired a few rounds of ammunition in the air to

prove my commitment and loyalty to the cause. Many of us knew that Mafika had helped some boys from the neighbourhood to go into exile. Whenever I broached the subject, and told him I wanted to go into exile, he would change the subject. This infuriated me, but it brought to me a sense of relief.

In due course, as my reading intensified, I found a poem that spoke to me about this dilemma. It was a poem by Arthur Nortje, a poem that articulated the writer's role in the war against apartheid:

Darksome, whoever dies
In the malaise of my dear land
Remember at swim
The moving waters spilling through my eyes:
And let no amnesia
Attack at fire hour:
For some of us must storm the castles
Some define the happening.

But I couldn't confidently "define the happening" without first fully understanding it in its complexity. It soon occurred to me, not for the first time of course, that "the happening" was rooted in the past. So, it was only prudent that I look back to the past. I had to go back to the past to make sense, for example, of the State of Emergency. The first State of Emergency had been imposed in this

country in 1960, six years before I was born. With this understanding of the past, the writer begins to appreciate the essence of his writing in a society in flux. He realised, then and still believes today, that the past would always impinge on his writing in the present. He began to understand that literature is not a linear process, or a continuum, but a series of dislocations that feed into each other.

As a writer, I began to understand why I was writing. I was writing, and still write, not because of some abstract muse that whispers in my ear, but because of the over-riding imperative to understand, to make sense of things. In other words, the writer wades in the detritus and debris of history where he fishes out some fragments of the past, fragments which he then shapes into artistic interventions in contemporary society. Of course in dredging up the past and confronting contemporary society with it in all its sometimes shocking and ugly glory, the writer tends to upset the establishment. The past will not always be a comfortable place to be. But for some the past holds redemption. I believe that a choice made today projects itself backwards and changes our past actions.

Don Mattera says memory is the weapon. But I want to know this: what *is* memory? How is memory shaped? Who decides what needs to be re-membered, or what's worth memorialising. This is the contemporary writer's conundrum of the postcolony.

For, Denis Hirson¹ grappling with the problem of memory is to first examine and utilise an outsider's gaze into the meaning of some commonplace words in South African language. Words that we live with; words that we consume with our cereal in the morning. One such word is "township". It's a simple word which, we shall soon see, is loaded with meaning. It's a word burdened with history; a word that is the inevitable constituent of our past and present memory. Words are not innocent and silent bystanders in the hegemonic war for control of public discourse. In his search for the proper meaning of the word "township" and the baggage that it brings in its wake, Hirson writes:

As early as 1820, British Settlers were 'located' in buffer zones known as 'locations' from which they were not allowed to move, in order to keep black tribes at bay. By 1929, 'township' was used to designate a restricted place of black (later also Coloured or Indian) habitation. Under apartheid, the two names became synonymous. A 'location' was not a neutral geographical position, but historically a place where residents were ordered to stay put: a town ship, cut loose from the moorings of the white city, the shores of money and political power. Residents, particularly when black, were cornered as a labour force; they were, in effect, living in 'warehousing for migrant labour'. They returned from the white city at night, after hours jammed in buses, trains, and (as of the 1980's) mini-bus taxis, potentially primed with the implosive energies of humiliation, in turn vented against the closest available victims, often women or children.

In keeping with the regime's plans and intentions, the word township became shorthand for that which was on the fringes of society. The township became an afterthought, a dumping ground for society's undesirable elements; the

¹ White Scars: On Reading and Rites of Passage

surplus people who were only called upon when there were chores to be done. Over the years, then, the word township came to conjure up images of teargas, of children with distended bellies, of drunk abusive men, of submissive wives, of knife-happy drugged out youngsters, of Aids-infected single mothers, of irresponsible, irredeemable social rejects of the lowest order. These are the clichéd images of the township that we have gotten used to, thanks to pop culture, the media and of course literature written from the outside looking in. The dominant literature of this writer's childhood was saddled with these suffocating representations of the township and its inhabitants.

The publication, in 1977, of Gwala's poetry anthology *Jol'iinkomo* was a breath of fresh air in the fetid stench that had dominated the literary landscape. The poems look to the past in order to situate the reader in the present. As Pius Adesanmi reminds us:

To solve a problem is to understand it in all its manifestations and ramifications and this includes its origins and modes of perpetuation. Yet, mentioning the colonial origin of many of the afflictions of the continent has become unfashionable in many of our disciplines. In my own discipline, it is taboo and could earn you a citation by the essentialism police.” - ²

² #WhoOwnsTheProblem – Address delivered at the Fourth Annual African Renaissance for Unity Conference convened by the Africa Institute of South Africa and the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute, Pretoria, South Africa, on May 22, 2014

However, if the writer pays too much heed to what the critics are saying, or what the theoreticians are recommending, the writer might end up not writing at all. Gwala was mindful of the power wielded by critics and academicians. Of this, the critic and academic Thengani Ngwenya has written: “Like the Afro-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance with whose work he was thoroughly familiar, Gwala chose to confront social injustice head-on offering trenchant and unapologetic responses to critics who questioned the literary merit of his poetry. He made it abundantly clear to the white liberal establishment that dominated Literary Studies at the time that he was not prepared to conform to the demands of literariness as defined by university professors.”

You could argue that his stance was simply that: you cannot write normal poetry in an abnormal society. This assertion is eloquently illustrated in Gwala’s poem “In Defence of Poetry”, which appeared in his second anthology, *No More Lullabies*, which appeared in 1982. In the poem, the narrator raises questions about the patently violent and repressive tactics of the apartheid regime including deaths in detention, killing of school children and racial oppression. The final stanza provides a direct and unapologetic response to the keepers of poetic standards:

As long as

this land, my country

is unpoetic in its doings

it'll be poetic to disagree.

Largely because Gwala's work and that of his contemporaries was a direct response to the socio-political conditions of his time his work will continue to appeal to the discerning literary historians interested in the complex interconnections between history and literature.

Ari Sitas, in his inaugural Mafika Gwala Lecture, said: “I have argued before that Mafika Gwala exists within a continuum of poetry in Natal- a continuum that he ruptures: there are the primordial moments of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi writing in Zulu and establishing defiant sense of nationhood which contrasts sharply with HIE Dhlomo’s English take on nationhood and class. A close reading of their respective poems on the Valley of a Thousand Hills would be a starting point.⁵ Both mark the shift from Native to African. Then, there is the poetry of Mazisi Kunene which takes Africanism, Zuluness and resistance to a new level. The irony was that Mazisi Kunene wrote in isiZulu and had to translate his work into English due to his exile years. And there is Mafika Gwala.”

When my first novel, *Bitches Brew*, came out in 2006, Gwala was one the

first to congratulate me. “You are beginning to write about what you know, without boring the hell out of your reader,” he said.

With *Bitches Brew*, which was received with both critical and commercial acclaim, I told a simple love story between two “safe” characters shebeen queen Sis Lettie and the jazz trumpeter Bra Zakes.

I was heartened by the overwhelmingly positive response to the book. Without realising it, in writing the book I had done what the critic Njabulo Ndebele calls “rediscovering the ordinary”. Without saying it in so many words, Gwala had been doing that through his poetry for a long time, long before Ndebele theorised it. Gwala’s poetry was a disruption, a revolutionary act. It did the unexpected: instead of praising the leaders of the revolution, it paid tribute to the underestimated, underpaid factory worker. His poems are odes to the shebeen queen, the taxi driver.

In the preface to his novel *Le Bleu du Ciel*, Georges Bataille argues that literature is an essentially disruptive force, a presence confronted in “fear and trembling” that is capable of revealing to us the truth of life and its excessive possibilities.

In later years, as my confidence as a writer grew, Mafika would every now and then ask me to write a history of our township, Mpumalanga, near

Hammarsdale. He had enjoyed my autobiography *Touch My Blood*, which paid tribute to the township. But he expected a bigger book, a more ambitious tome. He said by writing such a big, we would begin to unshackle ourselves from the monster of apartheid. While he agreed that the system of apartheid was dead, our minds, our souls were still in the clutches of the ghost of apartheid. In order to free ourselves from those clutches, we had to free our history.

Put another way, and as Frantz Fanon once noted, colonialism is not satisfied with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. The colonialist turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. I concur. And with this in mind, cultural reclamation is therefore an imperative for me as a writer.

But cultural reclamation dictates that I should know who I am; that I should know who my people are. That is the lesson that I learned from Mafika Gwala. Without using a sledgehammer to drive his point home, he gently let me into the hearts of his people, my people. It was as if he had wire-tapped the deepest feelings of the human heart. He went beyond the blood-spattered façade of black reality as portrayed in many literary texts. He taught me how to write from a black consciousness perspective. However, before you reach out for your Charterist guns and knobkerries, let me point out that the Black Consciousness that I am referring to is not that of the narrow sectarian, or party-political stripe. Azapo - if it still

exists in any form - does not own the black consciousness that I am referring to. Not even the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania can claim propriety over black consciousness. Black consciousness has no physical or postal address. Black consciousness does not have a website. It is not listed on Facebook, twitter, instagram or what have you. Black consciousness lists itself in the human spirit.

I interpret black consciousness as an injunction to the highest fulfilment of a people's possibilities. Stripped of the unfortunate political baggage, black consciousness does not seem to me to be a polarising force. It is rather a call for the reawakening of the spirit. Wherever people have been oppressed and stripped of their dignity, the first thing they need to do is remember who they are. In other words, go back to the past, have another look at their historical narratives, shape those in a manner that is reaffirming and forward-looking. As we are confronted with new evidence, as we gain new insights into our past, we shall and should gladly correct the distortions.

Ben Okri amplifies this even further:

The heart of Black Consciousness is a message of 'becoming'; its goal is not limited, it hints at a continuing journey of self-discovery and self-realisation. This can be as wide and as expansive as the mind that interprets it. There can be no end to a self-realisation. Every day we discover more and more who we can be – this is what Black Consciousness says to me: become who you are, and also, become what you truly can be. It is an injunction of greatness.

And so, taking a leaf from Okri's book, I decided to go back to the past. In perambulations of the pathways, the byways and pavements of history, I stumbled upon a story that was first reduced into a footnote in our history books. A story that effectively had been obliterated completely from public discourse. This is the story of the sinking of the Mendi. It is easy to glibly reduce it into an event: the mere sinking of a ship. Hundreds of ships have disappeared in the high seas ever since man started sailing. So what was so special about the Mendi?

I decided focus my literary gaze on the Mendi because this is a story that has all the elements that make South African history interesting. And, as we all know, history is contested terrain usually defined by the victors. At the heart of the story is: land dispossession; the denial of the native's the right to vote; the separation of the black man from his family to help the white masters fatten their wallets, and the spiriting of this country's riches to the insatiable banks and museums and art galleries of Europe.

The story of the Mendi – before the sinking, during the sinking, and after the sinking - is one that has never been told. Yes, Professor Albert Grundlingh of Stellenbosch University has worked hard in generating interest in the story, but aside from his sterling efforts not much scholarship has been channelled towards this very important chapter in the making of this nation. So, relying mainly on

newspaper clippings from that era, I embarked on a project to write a novel that re-imagines the sinking. By re-imagining of course, the writer is loyal to the historical facts - such as they are. And these are the facts: during the first world war, colonial South Africa sent around 24 000 black men to go and serve in Europe. One of the battalions left the country in January 1917. A month later, the SS Mendi, the ship they were travelling in, collided with another ship. It went under, taking the lives of 646 men.

When I realised that the story of the sinking of the SS Mendi had not been written about in book form, I saw an opportunity. I saw an opportunity to do what Mafika had suggested. To start freeing black South African history from the clutches of colonialists. That is how I got to write my novel *Dancing the Death Drill*. The book does not only dramatize the sinking of the ship, but it also seeks to answer a number of questions about the state of black South Africans at that time. It's a pity Mafika Gwala passed away in 2014, when I was still researching the book. I wonder what he would have made of my attempt at living up to his injunction: let's free our history from the colonial and apartheid past.

Immediately after the publication of *Dancing the Death Drill*, I was alerted to yet another story which I call a hidden pocket of our history. The story takes place in 1899. Just weeks before the British declared war on the Boers, those in charge of gold mines in Johannesburg decided to shut down the mines. This

immediately sparked food riots in the city. There were clashes between black people and the police. But most tragically, it soon occurred to everyone that black people in Johannesburg were trapped. The trains which would have taken them back home to Zululand, Natal, Transkei, etc, had been taken over by the army.

A group of responsible Zulu men thought this could only end in disaster. So they went to a white man who'd been instrumental in bringing many of them to the mines. His name was John Marwick. However, because of his proficiency in isiZulu, and the fact that he enjoyed an easy rapport with many men, they called him uMuhle. They asked Muhle to communicate with Government, to ensure a safe passage for the Zulu men who were prepared to walk back home. Indeed, Muhle wrote a flurry of letters to the magistrates of the towns that the men and their families would be passing through on their way to Natal and Zululand. In the letters he explained that the magistrates should pacify their communities, warn them not to shoot when they see a huge group of black people approaching.

Indeed, on October 7, 1899, a group of just over 7 000 Zulu men, and some women and children, started walking from Johannesburg. It took them 10 days to get to Ladysmith. Sadly, in reporting the story, the newspapers of the time only focused on the white man, John Muhle Marwick. The 7 000 black people he was walking with were simply referred to as Natives. Their names were not mentioned. Their story, as a result, was never told. With Mafika Gwala's words still ringing in

my ears after so long, I thought I should correct this. Only through telling the story from the black perspective would I bring a semblance of justice and closure to the narrative. Which is why in September this year, I published my new historical novel, *The Longest March*.

Thanks to the inheritance left to us by Mafika Pascal Gwala, we have made the choice to continue with the journey towards finding and celebrating, through our literature, the elusive human spirit. We are rescuing our history from our past masters. We are building a firm and sturdy monument to our history, building it brick by brick. The choice we have made today projects itself backwards and changes our past actions *and* inactions. In other words, this is the time for our redemption.

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- Fred Khumalo is a journalist, short story writer and novelist based in Johannesburg. His new book *The Longest March*, out in September 2019, is a reimagining of a march by 7000 Zulu men from Johannesburg to Natal at the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War. His previous novel *Dancing the Death Drill*, based upon the sinking of the SS Mendi during First World War, won the 2019 Humanities and Social Sciences Award. A stage adaptation of it was performed to rave reviews at the Royal Opera House in London, and also at the Bergen International Festival in Norway, in 2019. In September 2019, the play toured Australia. His other books are: *Talk of the Town and Other Stories* (short stories), *Bitches' Brew* (novel), *Touch My Blood* (autobiography), *Seven Steps to Heaven* (novel), *Zulu Boy Gone Crazy* (essays), *The Lighter Side of Life on Robben Island* (essays) *#ZuptasMustFall and Other Rants* (essays). He holds an MA Creative Writing from Wits University, is a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, a Fellow at the Academy of the Arts of the World (Cologne, Germany) and also a PhD (Creative Writing) candidate at the University of Pretoria