

# IN DEFENCE OF PROTEST FICTION: A PROPAGATION

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**Abstract:** This paper is a commentary on the nature of Protest Fiction during the Apartheid years and the criticism this literary art-form attracted. It is argued here that Protest Fiction is a worthy branch of literature and that some conditions, rather than so-called literary conventions, determine and define the type of literature some writers produce. Protest Fiction writers were certainly aware of the conventions of literature as defined from a Euro-American point of view and they deliberately ignored them and chose to define their art-form from their own perspective. This commentary defends Protest Fiction and propagates for the inclusiveness of literature. It argues against critics arrogating upon themselves the right to define what constitutes acceptable literary forms. It is the view of the writer in this commentary that even in post Apartheid South Africa, Protest Fiction remains relevant and serves as a rich historical record of the past. In fact, there is a dire need for the resurgence of Protest Fiction to record the ills of our society today.

Literature, like all the other art-forms, cannot really be seen from one point of view as it subscribes to different schools of thought, with the schools constantly at loggerheads in relation to technique and content of a narrative. But it must be clear here that the role of a narrative depends largely on its persistence to complexity of a given historical situation without exhausting itself by an indulgence or pre-occupation with the history itself, for then it will inevitably trap itself within that given historical time-frame. This then gives rise to a saturation of what to write about and we then end up with a genre whose main characteristic, it would seem, is repetition. This on the surface is Njabulo Ndebele's stated position.

I shall attempt here to explore Njabulo Ndebele's relationship with the liberal-humanist tradition and how his theory of the storytelling tradition developed. To start with, I shall point out certain principles of liberal-humanism. Liberal-humanist literature is characterized by its claims to make itself the centre of literary perceptions. This type of literature sets standards of literary appreciation. Liberal-humanists have convinced themselves that art can only be judged by their own set standards and any literary work that falls outside the scope of their idea of art is dismissed as artistically lacking. They have made themselves the centre of literary aesthetics by promoting what they regard to be 'good art'. This 'good art' describes only their works or works similar to theirs. Every other type of literature that does not fall within this ambit is criticised as crude or immature literature.

In the South African context, liberal-humanist art pre-occupies itself by assessing the racial scenario in the country and the effects of deliberate, oppressive policies and how they affect the oppressed. Liberal-humanist literature in South Africa is, to a large extent, observation or research literature. The works of Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer

spring to mind. This article does not seek to detract any attention from these writers' great literary accomplishments.

Ndebele, in an essay titled 'South African Literature and the Construction of Nationhood', makes the following statement about liberal South African literature and its tendency to portray itself as a centre of literary aesthetics: "This is a literature emerging from a society that has perceived itself as history's primary agent in South Africa" (1992:23).

Liberal literature is projected in a leisurely manner from a position of privilege; it does not fully explore the trauma of apartheid. It is, as I have indicated earlier, an art-form which has very paternalistic characteristics. In South Africa, liberals write about their understanding of the aspirations of the oppressed without doing anything constructive to help alleviate the suffering of the oppressed. Ndebele makes the same point, which, incidentally also shows his position in relation to them, when he writes in the same article that:

If art plays an adversary role in society, asking disturbing questions, revealing unsettling feelings, attitudes, and experiences, then we will understand why it was writers who went further to ask the next two questions: How has what we have done to them affected them? How has it affected us? It will immediately be clear that the 'us' in the last question does not include the writers who are trapped in their own society (1992:23).

As if this were not an observation on liberal literary artists in South Africa, Ndebele becomes clinical in his analysis and elaboration in emphasis of the above point by adding:

They were born within it; it sent them to well-equipped schools; it provided them with publishing opportunities; it sanctified their language through legislation and language academics; it gave them theatres, museums, art galleries, concert halls and libraries; it arranged for them special salary scales that ensure access to a range of cultural facilities as well as the ability to buy books and newspapers; it created literary awards to honour them, it also made possible for some of them to become critics and reviewers who influenced literary taste and declared standards; it protected them in law against the claims of the other, by assuring them of the privacy of residential areas legally inaccessible to the 'other'; thus ensuring they all socialized among themselves; it gave them passports to travel, they could meet other writers internationally; it sought to make them take for granted the elevated status of their citizenship and its attractive resulting

comforts. Since they were concerned about the 'other' and the effect of the 'other's' plight on their own humanity, theirs became a bi-polar existential reality of moral abhorrence accompanied by a physical inability to escape the conditions of that abhorrence (1992:24).

In the above explication of liberal literature and its privileged status in South Africa, there is obviously a tinge of bitterness in Ndebele's tone. As Ndebele has correctly observed, the liberal literary artist in South Africa, because of the conditions they have created or find themselves in, cannot escape from the cocoon which defines their literary scope. As a result, their literary art and perceptions are trapped into definable fixations. This paper does not suggest nor does Ndebele that liberal literary artists are totally incapable of seeing art outside the scope of their own literary limitations. I am simply stating a case about the historical conditions that inform the liberal's perception and her/his art. By this I also hope to show Ndebele's relationship with liberal-humanists and by implication his refusal to be associated with them as his own criticism of their art testifies.

In this case, the question that needs to be asked is: If Ndebele's art is not influenced by the liberal-humanism or his immediate environmental conditions, as apparent in his distancing of himself from the liberal-humanists and what has come to be known as Black South African Protest Fiction, where then is it grounded? Ndebele's artistic perceptions are rooted in the fact that a work must of necessity comprise two fundamental aspects; ordinariness and complexity. In an article titled 'Rediscovery of the Ordinary' Ndebele argues for ordinariness as an essential component of the "storytelling tradition" as opposed to obvious portrayals of "the spectacular" in South African literature. In response to Siphos Sepamla's defence of Protest Fiction, Ndebele hammers his point home by declaring:

I have listened to countless storytellers on the buses and trains carrying people to and from work in South Africa. The majority of them have woven master-pieces of entertainment and instruction. Others were so popular that commuters made sure that they did not miss the storytellers' trains. The vast majority of the stories were either tragedies about lovers, township jealousies, the worries of widows, about the need to consult medicine men for luck at horse racing, or luck at getting a job or at winning a football match; or they were fantastic ghost stories... And we have to face the fact here: there were proportionally fewer overtly political stories. When they talked politics they talked politics. If any political concept crept into the stories, it was domesticated by a fundamental interest in the evocation of the general quality of African life in the township... In all these stories and songs, I am made conscious of Africans in South Africa, as makers of culture in their own right. I am made conscious of them as philosophers, asking ultimate questions about life, moral values, and social being (1991:33).

After this, I don't think that the point that Ndebele makes about the concept of story-telling needs belabouring. However, one should point out that Ndebele should not be misconstrued to imply that all black fiction has a total disregard for the concept of 'storytelling'. He acknowledges that there is a small percentage of black South Africans who write stories that fall within the category of the storytelling format. What concerns him primarily is that protest fiction writers tend to write what Kaizer Nyatumba, the journalist, calls "a genre of expository or journalistic fiction". This is a type of writing that is overwhelmingly concerned with an almost mechanical "surface" representation, making political cases, and, as Ndebele aptly puts it, 'striking a blow for freedom'.

In trying to establish a changed, relevant aesthetic for South African literature, Ndebele does not claim this aesthetic to be a new one. Rather he acknowledges that it is an art-form that has both local and international links and origins. For instance, in asserting his views on ordinariness within the storytelling tradition, he claims to have come to his realization about the over-politicized nature of contemporary black South African fiction after he had read the Turkish writer, Yasher Kemal's stories. On the nature of Kemal's stories, Michael Banghon noted that:

Because Kemal understands the conventions of storytelling narrative so well, and because of his familiarity with local storytelling tradition, he can draw his reader into an "imaginative" yet critical reflection upon the social processes of rural Turkey (1990:187).

In the article, "Turkish Tales...", Ndebele points out how he was jolted to a new awareness about literature, after he had read Kemal's stories, and particularly the way in which South African literature further "journalistic and sloganistic ambience" in its representations. Protest Fiction, he claims, is repetitive in nature and has the tendency to disregard certain aesthetic values such as "complexity" and "interiority". In its exhibitionist form, protest fiction records and provides supposed answers rather than posing problems, as Chekov would have literature do.

Though Ndebele claims to understand the nature of Protest Fiction and why it assumes the form it does, it is clear that he would rather Protest Fiction change its narrative style and adopt a literary technique worthy of artistic merit. He feels this literature should revert to the storytelling tradition. He is, of course, not saying that their works should totally be devoid of politics. After all, politics shapes social behaviour, and literature is historically induced social behaviour. Terry Eagleton, whose works one must assume Ndebele has read, given the similarity of artistic perception, writes:

The task of theatre is not to "reflect" a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically produced, and so how could they have been, and still be, different. The play, therefore, becomes a model of that process of production, it is less a reflection of, than a reflection on, social reality (1987:65).

This, Ndebele would readily ascertain, is what makes writers like Yasher Kemal, Dikobe and others, great artistic writers. Their works, he would point out; form a “unified totality”. Eagleton, in furthering his Marxist perceptions on great art and artists, pointed out:

The greatest artists are those who can recapture and recreate a harmonious totality of human life. In a society where the general and the particular, the conceptual and the sensuous, the social and the individual are increasingly torn apart by the “alienations” of capitalism, the great writer draws these dialectically together into a complex totality. His fiction thus mirrors in microcosmic form, the complex totality of society itself (1987:28).

To go back to my earlier argument on liberal-humanism, one is reminded here of the nature of the concept. It occurs to me that liberal humanist literature and Protest Fiction, despite their different styles of literary projection, are similar in their limited, stereotyped forms. Whereas liberal-humanists texts privilege the centre, emphasizing the ‘home’ over the ‘native’, the ‘metropolitan’ over the ‘colonial’, Protest Fiction emphasizes the ‘obvious’ and ‘politics’ over ‘artistic complexity’. Artistic stereotyping is a sure way of diminishing the artistic worthiness of literary works. It suffices here to quote Alex Comfort in *The Novel in Our Time*, wherein he writes in a manner of propagating a fundamental aspect of the novel. He writes: Interpretation rather than an attempt to convince is the chief object of art (1948:8)

I am, therefore, of the opinion that history and literature are interconnected and that literature is largely a product of social and historical time-frames and trends. Piniel Viriri Shava, in the introduction to his book, *A People’s Voice...*, quotes Bernice Slote as having defined literature thus:

In the plainest sense, of course, literature is itself one part of the structure, the institutions, the actions of society – like bread and banking. In action literature is both a reflection and a force. It may simply record the kind of society that the writer knows – its values, problems, structure, and events. Or with bludgeon or rapier, it may attack this very society and its present evils. More often, literature embodies the writer’s evaluation of his world, or illuminates its possibilities (1989:v)

What attracts me to this definition is its accommodativeness and the fact that Slote realizes the multifaceted nature and objective of literature depending on particular contexts. What becomes readily obvious to me is that the appreciation or rejection or marginalization of literature is largely relative. Terry Eagleton writes in this regard:

John M Ellis has argued that the term “literature” operates rather like the word “weed”: weeds are not particular kinds of plants, but just any kind of plant which for some reason or another a gardener does not want around. Perhaps “literature” means something like the opposite: any kind of writing which for some reason or other somebody values highly (1983:9).

This does not suggest that Eagleton does not have a more complex and concrete definition of literature. I use the above quotation simply to reinforce my assertion of the relativity of literature to socially and politically determined time periods. Ngara, in asserting the fact that literature is socially and historically conditioned and that it is not necessarily a reflection of the dominant ideology, points out that:

Literature enables us to see the nature of the ideology of an epoch because it is socially conditioned. In other words, works of art are basically reflections of particular social conditions and relationships. Although they have an autonomous existence and are produced by individuals who may hold divergent views about life, they have a more or less direct relationship with historical developments (1985:21).

He adds:

The argument advanced here is that the African novel is not only the product of a class – the intelligentsia – but also the result of historical conditions. Modern African literature should not be seen in isolation from the prevailing economic and socio-political and from the dominant ideologies of the world in which it is produced. Equally important is the need to study African literature in its historical and intellectual context. To strip the African novel of its historicity is to sink into empty and sterile academicism (1985:21).

The history of Protest Fiction is largely determined by the historical conditions which prevailed in the country. To judge Protest Fiction outside this scope is to judge it out of context as Ngara points out. Though determined by its historical context, Protest Fiction writing is not a spontaneous activity; it is a deliberate activity which actually reacts against the brutally oppressive apartheid state. Shava contends that:

Black South African literature is a literature of protest. It protests against social, political, economic and military arrangements which deprive black people of civil rights and free expression of their aspirations. As a result, this literature has tended to be overwhelmingly political and proletarian in outlook, and concerned with the problems of colour and class. This preoccupation with politics makes it incumbent upon black South African writers to address themselves to the subjects in a manner that reveals commitment... In the South African context commitment is calculated to inculcate political understanding and to promote change (1989:v)

It is therefore fitting that Protest Fiction, as an established genre within a given geographical and historical context, should have its own relevant literary theory and criticism because other literary theories and criticisms many do it injustice. Protest Fiction is, according to Shava, to a large extent, a literature that openly defies what is termed “conventional literature”.

The idea of post colonial literary theory emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing. European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of “the universal”. Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of post colonial writing (1989:11)

Although I agree with some of Ndebele’s assertions about literature, I disagree with him in this paper because I think they are somehow out of context. The article in which he criticizes Protest Fiction, ‘Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fictions’, was published in 1984. He bemoans the “journalistic” style of Protest Fiction and the preponderance of politics in it. He also argues that it concerns itself with “exteriority” rather than project “interiority”. Furthermore, Ndebele contends that Protest Fiction is devoid of the “storytelling tradition”. At the time of writing his paper, Protest Fiction was indeed relevant. And contrary to what he thinks, it is still relevant today. If this article had been written today in these changing times, it would indeed make a lot of sense as it would address literature in a changed historical and social context. Even then, isn’t there room for Protest Fiction even in today’s society? Rosemary Gray and Stephen Finn, in an introduction to their anthology of poems, write:

From the earliest days of written literature the political and social disharmonies in South Africa have affected, some would say infected, all aspects of life in this country; none more so than the literary... Although we have poets who express their personal pains and predicaments as well as their singular dreams and desires in their works, the great corpus here is attuned to the political. This is true no matter what the sub-genre is... A time regarded as a watershed in South Africa’s history, a period straddling the old and the new, politically, socially and attitudinally as the country bobbles towards a new dispensation. The views of poets, their interests, their themes, their styles will no doubt change from now (1992:v).

Barbara Harlow quotes Trotsky in this regard as having written:

A profound break in history, that is, a rearrangement of classes in society, shakes up individuality, establishes the perception of the fundamental problems of lyric poetry from a new angle, and so saves art from eternal repetition (1987:1).

Is Ndebele, really fair in accusing these writers of writing in direct contradiction to their stated literary art positions? Perhaps one of the best defences of protest literature is the one advanced by Cecily Lockett in her article, ‘The Fabric of Experience: A Critical Perspective on the writing of

Miriam Tlali’ in which she defends Miriam Tlali’s works from a feminist perspective. She writes:

Where there has been critical response to her writings, white critics in South Africa have found her work problematic, and have judged in it in terms of inappropriate Anglo-American or European critical paradigms (1989).

Ndebele has adopted this critical stance. But it seems a few things are lacking. In his criticism he rarely mentions the personal position of these writers regarding their works. Perhaps if he had been objective in his criticism, he would have appreciated the fact that they are at least bold enough to challenge existing literary conventions and not afraid to start a new literary convention; and not ashamed to start a new literary tradition. The irony is that he shares the same reading public as those he criticizes.

What emerges clearly in Ndebele’s fiction and that of those he criticizes is a depiction of a world governed by a racial doctrine which determines the whole spectrum of the black man’s existence. Ndebele, Sepamla and Tlali all speak directly to their readers without trying to distance themselves from their own writings. When one reads of any of their fiction, one feels a direct, personal and emotional voice speaking with a desperation that invokes or appeals for one’s understanding. Even in a work produced outside the era of Protest Fiction, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) wherein Ndebele’s explores the trials and tribulations of the black woman, the emotional voice is so overwhelming.

Fiction is used in Ndebele’s and Protest Fiction writers’ works as an instrument to depict the black man’s perceptions and the entrained bigotry of whites in Apartheid South Africa. Though Ndebele’s language usage is by far superior to that of his black contemporary writers, he is still as easily accessible to black readers as they are. Besides, he would never claim to have intended his works for a white audience.

In their writings, all black literary artists combine their artistic awareness with their bitter personal or observed experiences to make their stories come closer to reality thereby making their stories reflections of a reality as seen through the eyes of the black man in South Africa.

In view of what has been stated above, it seems there is little real justification for Ndebele’s criticism of Tlali and Sepamla. This paper does not intend to take anything away from Ndebele as a critic and a writer. Quite the contrary; I actually think that his literary works are among the best ever produced in South Africa. The volume *Fools*, in particular, holds a special place in South African literature. *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* is certainly one of the best woven literary works any South African has ever produced. I must also note here that, though I disagree with his criticism of Tlali and Sepamla, I think it is constructive in a sense because there can be no doubt that those who are criticized will be on guard and that criticism facilitates different points of perception. This benefits the reader in that he is made to be critical in his reading since he is presented with two

different perspectives of the same thing. In today's South Africa, we are seeing a resurgence of Protest Fiction being produced alongside works by Ndebele and others.

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