
IDENTITY IN LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK WOMEN POETRY

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“Dear, dear Mama, they tell me I am a funeral dancer.” (The Dancer by Gcina Mhlope, The Lava of this Land, South African Poetry 1960-1996, 1997)

Abstract: The above lines taken from the poem “The Dancer” by Gcina Mhlope summarise the poetic voice of south African black women poets who implicitly or explicitly acknowledge a ‘they’ as well as ‘I’ to have a coherent view of one’s identity, both individual and social. A complete comprehension of one’s identity as a female, black literary artist in post Sharpeville Massacre era of 1960 and voicing of the same has been an act of painful, cultural activism for poetesses such as Bessie Head, Jennifer Davids, Gcina Mhlope, Gladys Thomas, Fatima Noki, Q. Buthelezi, Zinzi Mndela, Baleka Kgotsisile Barbara Masekela, Thombo Mbeka, Sono Molefe, Sankie Nkondo etc.

Introduction: While there is much poetry which has been published in English literature under the label, “South African poetry”, there is a scantily visible body of literature by black women poetesses as most of the visible work in English and English translations from Afrikaans is by the whites, the poets and poetesses. For example, the very valuable, well-researched anthology, titled, *The Lava of this Land* (1997) edited by Denis Hirson which contains south African poetry written between 1960-1996, has published work by just one black poetess, while there are works by twelve white poetesses. Further, South African black women poetry as a body of knowledge was not part of the English Literary Studies curriculum at either school level or college level, except at the Masters Level or the honours level in South African universities. (Gloria V Kgalane, 1996: 4). On this issue, critic Cecily Lockett says that the South African literary tradition has hitherto been an expression of the male experience, given the patriarchal society, with implication being that there was restraint on acknowledging female experience. (Lockett, 1990: 14, 15). Significantly, Lockett attributes this consequence to the imposed silencing of the female experience by anthologists, literary critics and teachers of Literature (Lockett, 1990:15). One can decipher that there has been limited opportunity for black, female literary artist, in terms of access to education and publishing avenues, given the double discrimination of being a black as well as being a female in apartheid ridden South African socio-political arena. There has always been a risk of censorship, being obliterated, voices being snuffed out, with the consequence being that the English

voice or the translated voice of the black, female poetess has almost been ignored in the twentieth century.

Since the present paper focuses on the time frame of late twentieth century, the paper examines poetry on the theme of identity by four black poetesses, namely Bessie Head, Jennifer Davids, Gcina Mhlope, and Gladys Thomas each who published between 1960’s and the 90’s, a blossoming time of black politico-cultural literary consciousness in South African context. Though scanty, these works are rare, significant monuments of marginalised female experience and conscience shaped by stoic acceptance of as well as dissonance on race, class and gender discrimination at the hands of the ruling whites. Given the fact that both unorganised and organised resistance to apartheid was on in South Africa, post 1976 Soweto children Uprising, the poetry written by South African, black women is critically read as a cultural voice set in the backdrop of anti-apartheid struggle (Gloria V Kgalane, 1996: 2). It is a soft, dissenting voice yet existent and assertive in revealing the social limitations for the black women, and black race in general.

In the context of late twentieth century black women poetry being a personal, dissenting voice yet existent, the study focuses on the black poetesses’ engagement with the issue of female identity as a biological reality as well as a social construct. Traditionally, South African oral poetic tradition included women story tellers who rendered a varied fare of praise, mourning, prophesy, humour, wisdom on the theme of familial, social life, and mores of country folk. Further, there is strong evidence for the social and

aesthetic relevance of the female poets in engaging with public discourse about domestic and social sphere in traditional South African orature. (Mtuzi, 1991:67, Gunner, 1989:17, Emmett, 1977:7). However, black women written poetry in began in early twentieth century in a nationalistic trend by Mrs. A.C.Dube and Mavis Kwanka and continued as marginalised protest poetry, both national and personal, or as dissent poetry written in exile by poetesses such as Bessie Head and other educated, urban, middle class women till the nineties.

Little Oxford English Dictionary (2012, 9th Edition) defines the term, 'identity' as the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. It also means a close similarity or a feeling of understanding. In creative writing as well as in literary theory, identity is dealt both as reality and as a construct, which is social as well as psychological. When one critically looks at theme of identity in black women poetry of 1970-1999, one is initially reminded of the deeply introspective, 'Self Portrait' by Bessie Head, which was written in July 1961, but remained unpublished for a long time, till it was discovered in 1995. The poetess-persona reflects on who she is, and finds that she is an idealist who is engulfed in anonymous depths of contradictions between reality and her personality attributes. The persona describes the 'I' as an apathetic, directionless, isolated earth worm who is active, yet static, bold and is flung to the top of a high sounding wave. Thus poetry to Bessie Head was an exercise in euphoric redemption of one's personal identity and not of the socio-political identity.

Another South African black poetess who reveals a consistent concern about one's identity as a woman, as a black and as literary artist is Jennifer Davids, whose 1974 poetic collection, " *Searching for Words*" was well-received by mainstream critics and readers. Davids also published several poems in journals such as *New Coin*, *Contrast* etc. She is the only black poetess whose poems were included in Chapman's *A Century of South African Poetry*(1981). Jennifer Davids is wrote individualistic poetry on what it takes to be a poetess as well as on striking images from everyday life of a poet , a teacher as well as a politician, while experimenting with poetic form and technique. Davids is critically read as poet of 'the mild protest or non-militant tradition' as there is no explicit protest against the apartheid situation. (Greig, 1974: 37). An interesting example in this genre, is Davids' poem, *Star*.

One finds that the poetess-persona speaks of self perception of a voice in one's centre. The irony is that though poetess is able to express her ideas, she is able to perceive it as a voice which loses its sound in the 'silence of one's birthplace (Davids, 1974, line 11)'. This silence enormously grows and overwhelms the persona, even though the persona 'breaks the blackness' (Davids, 1974, line 15). Scholar Kgalane opines that the silence imagery in Jennifer Davids is to be read as an attempt to find a voice as a poetess and as a black woman. (Gloria V Kgalane, 1996: 30)

Closely similar to Davids poetry of individualistic ideation of one's identity as existent black poetess is the reflective poetry by Gcina Mhlope written in 1980's. In poem titled, *The Dancer*, the poetess-persona sombrely brings out the sorrow of being an artist, a traditional dancer at a time of mourning. Thus, the sad side-effect of the black resistance to apartheid and inhuman existence thereof is discussed in her poetry. The identity that the poet brings out is one of a traditional African who follows the footsteps of her mother in becoming a well-known. However, the heart-felt irony is that while her mother was a dancer at weddings, the daughter, who is the persona, is a funeral dancer. An interesting detail in the poem is the use of 'they' in the poem. It is a pointer to the unique context prevalent in South African society of the 1970's, 80's and the 90's viz. the black females were labelled and identified by the ruling white males and females as Maids, Thieves, Scum etc and rarely as professionals or even someone worthy of mention. Gcina Mhlope, explicitly engages with identity as social construct, concerned with the way the black female identity was interpreted by others in the discriminatory South African society. The poetess, in a bold authorial stance which also acknowledges traditional African artistic legacy in tone and use of refrain to *Mama*, titles the poem as *Dancer* and not as *Funeral Dancer* . It is important to note that Gcina Mhlope voices out the female identity and the role played by a traditional African woman in her poetry.

Another significant example of a black poetess of the protest poetry tradition of the 1970's and 80's, who voiced her perception of identity in the backdrop of limited liberty and subjugated existence, is the well known Gladys Thomas. Critic February describes her as a poetry guerrilla fighter in her use of English prevalent in the black townships and rejection of poetic aesthetics(February,1981: 171). The identity

ideated by Poetesse Thomas is one of an angry, black, resistance artist. Written in conversational style, her poem, *Flight* is an important example of the angry woman artist as a persecuted victim. The poem starts with an unpunctuated question, "What is it you want from me" This rhetorical query is followed by the image of a hapless victim, a bird, a nurturer, who does not wish to see her nestlings deprived of food and kicked out of their nests, who would rather chose to get her feathers plucked out to look like a carcass awaited by the vultures. Very importantly, the persona speaks through a female consciousness in asking her mother bird as to why she gave birth to her young in this nest instead of other, greener pastures. There is also the image of 'I' persona as the hunted bird and 'they' as the hunter vultures. In another poem, *Leave Me Alone*, Gladys Thomas

portrays the worker -victim image. The poem is an vital example of female consciousness, which is victimised by unequal, inhuman situations. The lines, 1-4 are self-explanatory as follows:

I tear my hungry babe from my breasts

To come and care for yours

Yours grow up fine

But, oh God, not mine

In conclusion, there has been a consistent, realistic portrayal of identity in South African black women poetry of last three decades of twentieth century. This continuous engagement with one's identity has been portrayed in two predominant images, namely that of the silenced, yet alive female black artist and that of the angry, protesting victim. Thus ideation of identity has been a act of creative cultural activism to forge a voice as black poetesses.

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