

Looking Back and Looking Ahead: the Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho

Thulani Sokombela

University of Fort Hare, South Africa

Abstract: Until recently much of the literature recording the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Eastern Cape focused purely on frontier conflict and missionary activity, ignoring the evolving culture of the colonized people. This paper aims to examine the influence of Christianity on early South African writing by Africans and the ambivalence with which Christianity is often treated in their work. Through a post-colonial reading and critical analysis of the work of the little-known poet Nontsizi Mgqwetho, the results show that the calibre and relevance of her writing is undisputed: not only is her work a great historical resource but its subject matter also resonates with contemporary significance.

Keywords: Knowledge, Ambivalence and African Society

1. Introduction

The impetus for this research derives from the second edition of *The Post-Colonial Reader* and is best rendered by way of quotation; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin aptly point out that [d]ebates concerning the traditional and sacred beliefs of colonised, indigenous and marginalised peoples have increased in importance in post-colonial studies. Indeed, it would be true to say that it remains the field of postcolonial studies in most need of critical and scholarly attention. Since the Enlightenment the sacred has been an ambivalent area in Western thinking that has uniformly tended to privilege the secular. As Chakrabarty and other critics have reminded us, secularity, economic rationalism and progressivism have dominated Western thinking, while ‘the Sacred’ has so often been relegated to primitivism and the archaic. (7-8)

Nontsizi Mgqwetho is described by former South African president Thabo Mbeki as “the most prolific Xhosa woman poet of the twentieth century” (6). Though very little is known about Mgqwetho, Mgqwetho started writing her poetry to a weekly Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteleli wa Bantu* in 1920.¹ She made regular contributions to this newspaper until January 1929, when she “disappear[ed] into the shrouding silence she first burst from. Nothing more is heard from her, but the poetry she left immediately claims for her the status of one of the greatest literary artists ever to write in Xhosa” (“Introduction” xiv). Jeff Opland traced and collected her poems and with the help of Abner Nyamende and Phyllis Ntantala translated them into English. The result was the collection *The Nation’s Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho*, which contains both the original Xhosa and the English versions of her poetry.

Mgqwetho’s poetry is infused with great ambivalence towards both Christianity and traditional African beliefs, which makes it difficult to “position” her in ideological terms. The titles of her poems alone indicate this. In her poem “The prophecies about blacks have now come to pass! Listen! Isaiah 19:2, 4, 8- 10, 15-16, 20,” she draws heavily upon the Bible, calling Xhosa customs into question.

2. Looking Back and Looking Ahead

2.1. Cultural Context

Mgqwetho views the political situation in which Africans find themselves through a Christian lens: for instance, she takes it for granted that her readers are familiar with Christian texts such as the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, making reference to them without explanation. But the reader of this poem is apt to be left curious, if not confused, as to the poet’s view of African customs: why does she seemingly view them as useless and unable to help carry blacks across the “Stream of Despair”? The fact is that throughout her

Author: Thulani Sokombela. Tel: 0726061045. Fax: 0867297193. Email: tsokombela@ufh.ac.za

¹ *Umteteleli wa Bantu* was a multilingual weekly newspaper launched in 1920 by the Chamber of Mines in Johannesburg. See Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*: 251.

poems Mgqwetho assumes a series of different personae: sometimes she is a man, at other times a woman, a preacher, a sangoma, a Red² and a Christian.

As Jeff Opland points out, throughout Mgqwetho's work it is evident that "despite her dependence upon and familiarity with the Bible ... she often denounces it. [At times...] the bible [is] an agent of dispossession" ("Introduction" xxii), and at other times it is portrayed as containing the only solution to Africa's problems. This latter attitude obtains in poems like "Where are leaders like Daniel?," "If a man can't rule his own house, how would he manage God's nation?," and "He's here! The Drum of the Cross." In defence of her ambivalence towards Christianity, Mgqwetho argues that "The truth must be treated fairly, / the truth must be heard from both sides: / the truth is there in the scriptures / and also within our blankets"³ (196: 21-24). It is this outlook that informs Mgqwetho's poetry and makes sense of the multiple personas, ranging from sangoma to preacher, that she assumed in her attempt to indigenize Christianity and forge a genuine accommodation with traditional African cosmology. In "Why was the Bible created?" she asks:

"Didn't Ntsikana tell you to study the scriptures? And you left the whites to study them for you. I'm not mocking the whites when I say that. But it's written "Seek and ye shall find," it doesn't mean that someone else must do the finding for you. Listen then!" (Mgqwetho 420)

Here she appears to repudiate Christianity as preached by "the white," and calls on Africans to search the scriptures themselves in order to avoid exploitation and deceit. In Poem 30 she emphasises this further, stating that "[t]his gospel of theirs, designed to deceive us, stands as tall as I do down on my knees" (lines 43-48). Thus from the outset Christianity is seen as a tool of oppression that Africans need to examine for themselves so as to identify and extract such truth as it may contain. It is clear that Mgqwetho's poetry reveals a complexity and fluidity of identities and allegiances that makes it fertile ground for exploring the kind of ambivalence with which this study is concerned. Underlying the Christian discourse, for instance, are strong themes of the need for African unity, for honourable leaders, and for a return to the ancient paths, as well as for solutions to bring these about.

2.2. A call to unity

In the poem "Come back, Africa! Awu!" Mgqwetho uses the popular slogan of political resistance *Mayibuy 'iAfrika*, "Come back Africa," a clarion call for the restoration of Africa. She asserts:

For a long time now we've been calling, Africa.
Hear our wailing, Garden of Africa!!
Your crop was consumed and scattered by birds,
But you stood firm and never left us.
Our voices are hoarse from imploring you;
We track through nations, appeal to phantoms,
Nothing more than chicken's scratchings,
Eager at dawn, at dusk empty-handed.
drunk to death we call you home,
we cover your eyes and proclaim you blind,
you go right back to where you came from
as we call you home from the deaths of depravity
You say "Come back"? *You* must come back!!
You're profit to all the earth's nations,
they come from the north, they come from the south,
from the east and from the west.
Africa stayed! She's nowhere else:
look how the grass continues to sprout.
Look at the springs still bubbling with water.

² Africans who had not accepted Christianity or Western education were referred to as Reds because of the red ochre they smeared on their bodies and karosses (later, blankets).

³ Xhosa people who had not converted to Christianity wore blankets smeared with red ochre; thus in this context the blankets represent African tradition and wisdom.

Look all around, it's all in its place! (Mgqwetho 58:1-24)

The first two stanzas of the poem show a desperate cry for Africa's restoration after being "consumed and scattered by birds". Through "wailing" and "imploring" the "Garden of Africa" their voices have become hoarse; they have appealed to other nations but in vain. Although a foreign enemy came in and caused havoc, looking to other nations for help will bear no fruit, but is merely an "appeal to phantoms." In stanza two the call for Africa comes from various places where educated Africans live; they call Africa home yet they are "drunk to death" and their school-bags are "crammed" with alcohol; they call Africa back yet, as Mgqwetho puts it, they are sunk in "the depths of depravity." In stanza three Mgqwetho shows that instead of calling Africa to come back "*You*," the African, "must come back!!" Africa has not gone anywhere – it continues to flourish and all is in its rightful place. Thus the African should not be calling Africa to come back, but rather calling himself to return to his senses and to the old way of doing things, instead of forsaking tradition for the bottle.

In the fourth stanza the poet asks:

Will you go to the grave with nothing achieved,
raising your cry, calling "Come back"?
If *you* come back first the nation will rise
and news of its stirring will ring out to Jericho.
But tell us, Africa, where else in the world
Can any old fool say "Come home"?
From my point of view, we bear all the signs
as we stumble along in stupidity.
From the Buffalo's banks we raise our cry,
From the Tyhume's banks we raise our cry
For all the black nations under the sun,
so Satan's ashamed until his guts bust,
You display no love, display no togetherness,
you sit on the fence, won't take a stand.
Nothing but sell-outs, you set fires and run,
betray your own people to bolster the Whites. (58: 25-50)

In these two stanzas the African is asked to assess his condition before calling on Africa to "Come back," and the author suggests that until the African returns to his senses and does something about his present condition he will continue to "stumble along in stupidity." How, Mgqwetho asks, can he call "Africa back" while he "display[s] no love...no togetherness" and "won't take a stand," betraying his own people? She implores fellow Africans to take responsibility for their present situation and to see how they are implicated in their own subjugation. Once they do, Africa will begin to succeed and "news of its stirring will ring out to Jericho."

In the next stanza the poet becomes even more specific in pointing out what is wrong. She asks:

Are you raising a cry, saying "Come back"?
You'll cry yourselves hoarse; *you* must come back!
Gone are our customs for setting up homesteads,
monarchy, values, nothing is left!
You live like locusts left by the swarm,
you've lost all pride, your sense of a nation,
lock, stock and barrel, everything's lost:
you seek balm in the bottle that blots out all pain.
You say "Come back?" *You* must come back!
You scratch your head in search of a scapegoat.
Ntsikana warned you a long time ago,
"Money's the lightning-bird: leave it alone."
Child of the soil of far-flung Africa,

what have you done to so offend God?
 Here the Chink sells you malt for your home-brew,
 there the Coolie buys up your empties.
 Are you raising a cry? *You* must come back!
 Spurn advice and you'll come a cropper.
 Always recall where you come from:
 seek the seers to tell you straight.
 Mercy, South African hills, while your people die
 strangers cart off your country!
 With cause we cry, saying "Come back"
 to induce birth pangs in her people. (60:41-64)

In these stanzas hindrances to Africa's restoration are listed: the abandoning of African customs and values, the loss of pride and the waning of a sense of national identity. The African needs to go back to doing the things he did at first instead of "seeking balm in the bottle that blots out all pain," which causes him to seek a scapegoat. Alcohol and the love of money have taken over his senses. The poet asks: "Child of the soil of far-flung Africa,/ what have you done to offend God?" – implying that his present situation of oppression is punishment from God and can possibly be reversed. She instructs her reader to "seek the seers to tell you straight," those with spiritual insight who can find out the root of the problem as well as the solution. In the ninth stanza the call for Africa to "Come back" is now apt, for it will serve "to induce birth pangs in her people," to give life to a newly restored Africa. Only after Africans have reassessed themselves and their role in their current oppression, and returned to the ancient paths ("Always recall where you came from," l. 59), can they rightfully call "Come back, Africa!"

Peace, Sun! Peace, Moon!
 Stewards of our Protector,
 bear the report to the One on High,
 plead our case in elegant terms.
 Peace ! Awu!! (62:73-77)

In the final stanza the poet calls on the sun and the moon to convey the cry of Africa "to the One on High," within whose gift it is to answer prayers after Africans have done all they can to set their house in order and call Africa back. Thus the ultimate solution to Africa's restoration lies not below – where ancestors and spiritual deities were believed to be – but on High, where the Christian God resides.

To conclude, although the roots of Nontsizi Mgwetho's engagement with Christianity cannot be adequately traced, their influence is lasting and profound. Christian idiom enables Mgwetho's voice; it enables her to speak to all Africans regardless of ethnicity and use it as common ground upon which Africans can unite, reading "the bible against its 'misreadings'" (Brown 84). Her reading of the Bible enables her to see her people in it. For her it accounts both for the present condition of subjugation and its resolution, and it is the "foundational text of Africanness" in which black territorial integrity and her identity as an African are affirmed (Brown 82).

3. References

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