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# Did the First Democratic Elections of 1994 Also Democratise South African Publishing and Literature?

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## Introduction

Twentieth-century South African Literature has always been dominated by writers of European descent who write in their mother tongue—either English or Afrikaans, an “African” language which developed from 17th century Dutch. Internationally best known, for example, are Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, twice winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, and André Brink, awarded the French *Légion d’Honneur*—all living and still producing books. A younger generation of white writers is slowly making their mark internationally as well: Mike Nicol, Etienne van Heerden, Ivan Vladislavic, Pamela Jooste, Antjie Krog.

The work of black writers has been less visible. And that immediately brings us to the term “black writers.” You are probably all familiar with Bishop Desmond Tutu’s famous description of South Africans as the “rainbow nation,” a description that tries to encapsulate the diversity of the citizenry of the country. The population is in fact a gradation from fairly pale (white) to fairly dark (black), and they speak a variety of languages, eleven of which enjoy official recognition under the new regime. Until 1994 English and Afrikaans were the only two official languages; since 1994 English, the home language of less than 10% of the South African population, has become the language of documentation and unofficially the national language.

As you know, the first democratic elections of 1994 brought an end to apartheid, the official policy whereby, for more than forty years, people in South Africa were classified by colour. Instead of a rainbow where one colour blurs into the next, four distinct groups were demarcated: Whites, Coloureds, Indians and Africans, and depending on your classification, you lived in a particular area, went to a particular school—even qualified in a particular field of study and got paid a particular salary. This was the way in which the former regime responded to the multi-cultural nature of South Africa in order to implement its so-called “separate development,” a system whereby of the four groups, Whites were the most favoured and privileged and Africans the least.

It is not possible to go into greater detail in the short time available. However, what is important for the purposes of this talk is to realise that “black” writers in South Africa include “African,” Indian South African as well as writers of mixed descent. And that they speak a variety of languages at home; that English is an “adopted” language to the majority, often their second, or even a third or fourth language; and that until very recently coloured and Indian South Africans enjoyed better education than those termed “Africans.”

### **An uneven literary heritage**

Various factors have determined the uneven situation of writers and literature in South Africa; I would like to highlight the most important ones in order to create an understanding of the complexity of the South African literary scene.

- The first black writers in English emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All of them—Sol Plaatje, Tiyo Soqa, Vilakazi, were mission-educated and as a result their work was strongly influenced by their teachers, the missionaries, who mostly expected that their work should support the Christian doctrine.
- The shaping influence of the only coherent group of black South African writers in English—the so-called “*Drum* generation” of the fifties—was short-lived. With the

tightening of the apartheid policies many of these journalists and writers, men like Es'kia Mphahlele, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Todd Matshikiza, went into exile in the sixties, or fell silent. Thus the vibrant black English literary tradition they were spawning in South Africa received a fatal blow. This was particularly tragic, because:

- Unlike in the case of South Africans of European and Indian descent, a *written literary tradition*—books, in other words—does not form part of the cultural heritage of people from a traditional African background. In traditional African society myths, epics and sagas were, and in some cases still are, handed down from one generation to the next in oral form. It was an elderly storyteller who entrusted the stories and history of his or her people to a group of younger listeners, often in flickering firelight. Not the priest or scholar recording it on papyrus or vellum to be read by generations not yet born. Creative writing is therefore a fairly recent development in African society. For this reason the Malian writer, Amadou Hampate Ba, believes that the death of every old man in Africa, is like the burning of a library.
- It goes without saying that if books are not part of your cultural heritage, there will not be a strong *reading culture*. In fact, reading is often seen as anti-social behaviour because the content is not shared; instead the reader usually withdraws from the group to enjoy the book in private and thereby excludes the rest of the family or group.

All through history and in most cultures written literature gradually developed from oral roots. Or put differently: it is likely that oral literature would eventually spawn a written literature, given enough time and other favourable circumstances. What complicates matters in Africa, though, is that *television* as entertainment was introduced to the broader community almost simultaneously with the concept of reading for leisure and pleasure. Not only is television a more accessible medium, but watching it is also more sociable than reading a book can ever be. In

some ways television can in fact be regarded as fulfilling the role of, or even replacing the traditional storyteller. It is therefore doubly difficult in the technological age to inculcate a reading culture in an environment where the concept of the book as entertainment has never been firmly established.

- Another major factor is the high rate of *illiteracy*, especially among the older generations. Even in a relatively developed country such as South Africa the illiteracy rate is estimated to be as high as 30%, and according to some more pessimistic calculations, even 50%. This means that currently many African parents are not able to read, and that they therefore cannot pass the reading habit on to their children.

The problem is compounded by poverty and a general lack of access to books.

- Literacy in itself is not enough though. In South Africa a reading culture was not actively promoted by the *school system* most "African" children were subjected to. One of the premises of Bantu Education, as the mass education of black children was called, was to teach them "functional" reading and writing—basically, how to read and write well enough to function in a modern-day working environment. In short, Bantu Education did nothing to inculcate a love of reading and books in students. Prescribed readers and writing exercises were not designed to introduce African children to fine literature and creative writing and thereby create an appreciation of leisure reading and writing; it only fairly successfully combated illiteracy.
- A more complicated obstacle to the development of a vibrant reading and writing culture in South Africa than an inefficient education system, however, is the *language situation*. In most of Sub-Saharan Africa one finds the extraordinary situation that young people are not taught in their mother tongue, often not even in primary school and certainly not at tertiary level. With the exception, of course, of the native speakers of English, French and Portuguese, or those Africans who have adopted these

“colonial” languages as their home language; also the Afrikaans-speaking community in South Africa is an exception. It is easy to understand that for most people reading and writing in a second or third language come neither naturally nor without effort. Writing in a “foreign” language is especially difficult, because one is often not fully acquainted with the subtleties and nuances and emotional value of words. You are simply not as fluent and as comfortable in an adopted language as you are in the language you learnt from your mother—unless one has enjoyed a very good education from mother-tongue speakers of that language.

### **A matter of economics**

South Africa had and still has in comparison to most African countries a vibrant indigenous publishing industry, particularly in terms of non-tertiary educational books. No school textbooks, for example, are directly imported from former colonial powers. A fair number of multi-national publishing houses have, however, been operating in the country for many decades—publishers like Heinemann, Macmillan, Oxford University Press, Longman. But alongside these, fully South-African owned publishing houses have developed who produce both educational and general interest books—publications written, edited, designed and printed in South Africa. Some of these publishing houses have been around for sixty, seventy years, even though many more English-language books for leisure reading, so-called English trade books, are imported from Britain and the United States than are produced locally. This is of course the result of English being an international language and South African being a former colony.

If one operates in a small market, the publication of quality fiction—novels, short stories, drama and poetry—as well as non-fiction with a cultural slant, is seldom lucrative. The reason is that the production costs of books printed in small numbers (the average print run of South African English fiction is only 2 000 copies) are usually prohibitively high. Unless these books are in some way subsidised. Before 1994, the publication of indigenous

South African literature was in fact by and large only possible because the necessary "cross-subsidisation" could be generated from the sale of large quantities of books to educational institutions. As is still the case elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa, until 1994, the South African government enabled local trade publishers to publish indigenous literature by ordering sufficient numbers of school readers and books for public libraries for publishers to be economically viable enterprises.

Immediately after 1994 budgets for library purchases and the buying of school books were drastically cut (the available funds were used instead to make the salaries of white and black teachers more equitable and to appoint extra teachers in the traditionally black schools). The result of the lack of institutional buying of books is that South African publishers are experiencing great financial difficulties at the moment, and that trade (as opposed to educational) publishers are forced to take the commercial value of the publishing list into consideration rather than its literary or cultural merit. Hardly any poetry is being published at the moment, for example, as also very few books in any of the nine African vernacular languages.

Even before 1994 South African publishers of English fiction were always being hampered in a very different way—by the writers themselves. Because English is an international language; because there are historically such strong ties with Britain, and because the South African market for fiction is so small, many writers opt to have their books published in the United Kingdom rather than in South Africa. This, for example, means that Gordimer's, Coetzee's and Brink's novels, even works by Nicol and Jooste are these days edited and published in the UK and re-imported to South Africa. It is obvious that these well-known writers' work will sell in larger numbers than the standard print run of 2 000 copies, so by taking their manuscripts elsewhere to be published by large multi-national companies, these internationally known writers do not support the struggling South African publishing industry.

This in short, is the background against which indigenous South African publishers are operating and trying to encourage and grow a vibrant and varied indigenous South African literature.

### Which general books were published in the “old” South Africa?

One can only talk sensibly about this by looking briefly at the different languages: English, Afrikaans and the African vernacular languages.

#### *English:*

It is ironic that South African English writers thrived in the days of apartheid—much more so than now. The political interest in South Africa then created a market for books coming from the country. But the interest came at a price. People were basically interested in books reflecting the political situation and the discrimination suffered by Blacks or anyone who actively resisted the regime. All English writing became *littérature engagée*. Especially foreign church organisations were very supportive, and trade publishers such as Ravan and Skotaville received funding from overseas to enable them to publish so-called “struggle” literature and non-fiction, books which were often banned in South Africa itself. David Philip, also well known for its anti-government stance and excellent political books, did not receive funding but could build up a good export network and thereby stay solvent.

The drawback was that writers who were not inspired to engage with political issues in their work could not find a publisher. Very few innocent love stories and poetry, for example, saw the light of day. There was simply no demand. The opposite is true today: there is no interest in old-time “struggle” literature, and since 1994 both Ravan and Skotaville have practically disappeared, and David Philip has broadened its list to make it commercially more viable.

#### *Afrikaans:*

In the context of Africa, Afrikaans publishing is nothing short of a miracle. For a language whose official status was recognised only 75 years ago and which is spoken by about five million people today, it has an amazing literature and healthy



publishing industry. This is largely due to the fact that the language has European roots and therefore an old written literary tradition to draw on, while at the same time there is no competition, as in the case of English, from overseas imports. Almost every conceivable type of book is written and published in Afrikaans, as one would expect in Spanish, for example: poetry, cookery, tourist guides, illustrated coffee-table books, literary fiction, dictionaries, children's' books. All these books are published for local consumption, and yet quite a few Afrikaans writers are available in translation elsewhere. The average print run for Afrikaans fiction is 3 000 copies.

But the apartheid years also had an influence on Afrikaans literature. Although more than 60% of Afrikaans-speakers are not white, there were very few black—more specific, “coloured”—Afrikaans writers until very recently. This was not so much because of direct discrimination, but due to a lack of understanding on the side of the mainstream Afrikaans publishing houses of the socio-economic and educational background of most Afrikaans coloured writers. Even today, at a time when most businesses in South Africa feel obliged to employ African and Indian and coloured people, the three biggest Afrikaans publishing houses are still almost exclusively run by Whites. In all fairness it must however be said that there have been massive retrenchment in the whole publishing industry as a result of the recent collapse of the schoolbook market, so it is very difficult to appoint new staff at such a time.

#### *The African indigenous languages:*

Because the policy of separate development was based on developing all the different racial and cultural groups separately, great emphasis was placed on mother-tongue instruction in primary school. For this reason the publication of readers in the different South African vernaculars were encouraged and supported by the state by way of prescription at school.

It is another irony that writers in African languages were in a better position before 1994 than they are today. Again it is the result of the temporary collapse of the schoolbook market. There

have simply not been any demand for these books, so publishers have refrained from bringing any new titles on the market. Some of the literary prizes, designed to encourage African-language literature, could for example not be awarded a week or two ago due to a lack of entries.

Whether books in the nine South African African languages will again be needed for school use in the near future or not, the situation of literature in the vernacular is very precarious indeed. The reason is the attitude of the mother-tongue speakers towards these languages. Many of them do not support the use of the mother-tongue at school and in official places. It is spoken at home and happily used for communication within the social group, but it seems that very few urban Blacks are in favour of the use of their mother-tongue outside of this context.

Publishers experience that, with the exception of the well-known Zulu poet Mazisi Kunene, it is mainly academics and black writers living in rural areas who write in the vernacular. There are obvious reasons for this. To mention a few:

- the reading audience in the mother tongue is extremely limited, and so is the buying market;
- writing in the mother-tongue has very little status because in the past books were written only to support the Bantu Education system, or for religious purposes;
- there is not a written literary tradition to build and draw on.

But perhaps the most important reason, although it is seldom openly admitted, is the perception that the mother-tongue smacks of being backward and non-progressive. Almost all urban or urbanised black writers prefer to write in English, because it is seen as the language of sophistication, of commerce and self-advancement. After all, English is an international language, and by writing in it they believe, like white writers too, that their work will immediately be bought and read world wide (Nothing could of course be further off the mark. In your own country you can find a market much more easily than in the big, wide world out there, as proven by Afrikaans publishing).

### What is happening in terms of general publishing in the "new" South Africa?

Again it is easier to sum up the situation by briefly looking at the two major languages.

#### *English:*

Most of the prominent writers have continued to be as productive as before. After *Boyhood*, an autobiographical narrative about his youth, J.M. Coetzee recently received the Booker Prize for *Disgrace*, published last year; André Brink is as prolific as before, publishing all his novels simultaneously in Afrikaans and English, one every two years. Pamela Jooste, who made quite an impression with *Dancing with a poor man's daughter*, last year followed up with *Frieda and Min*. As I mentioned before, these writers all get published in the UK and their books are imported back into the country.

But their ranks have been swelled over the last five years by writers who had either been silenced through being banned, or who have been silent for a number of years, or who are completely new on the scene. All of them, however, prefer to have their work published in South Africa first.

The most illustrious of these writers is perhaps award-winning Achmat Dangor, someone whose work was well known in the days of the political "struggle" but who had been silent since 1990. In 1997 he published *Kafka's Curse*, a novella, which has subsequently been sold to seven foreign publishers, among them Seix Barral in Spain! Of this book Nadine Gordimer says, "This is a South Africa you haven't encountered in fiction before." And indeed, South Africa is portrayed in a much more playful manner than was possible in the serious days of apartheid.

Another novel, a debut this time, that also looks at our recent past, and the political struggle in particular, in an almost irreverent way, is Bridget Pitt's *Unbroken Wing*.

The tendency away from politics goes one step further in a wonderful first novel that has just appeared, *Shark's Egg* by

Henrietta Rose-Innes. The novel does not concern itself with public life at all, but with a very private disillusionment and rebirth.

If one can point to one shift in post-1994 writing it would be this: that writers do not feel the obligation to take politics so seriously. Even André Brink, at one stage known only for his political novels, has turned his back on such heavy matters and is now pursuing magic realism and feminism.

Yet it will take a long time for writers to work through the trauma of South Africa's past—recent as well as further back. Two writers who returned to South Africa after an absence of almost three decades, do it in completely different ways. Arthur Maimane, who lived in London and worked for the BBC, has completely revised his first novel, set in Johannesburg in the sixties and published in the UK in the early seventies, to be reissued in South Africa, where it was banned before. *Hate no more* has as its theme the rape of a white woman by a black man who thus sought to vent his anger and frustration.

Rayda Jacobs, who refers to herself as one of the “middle children,” tries to come to an understanding of her mixed blood and heritage by writing historical novels. In the first, *Eyes of the Sky*, she looks at the initial encounters between the European settlers and the indigenous San and Khoi people. In her second novel, *The Slave Book*, she explores the period following the abolition of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope in 1835.

The most interesting new English writing to have emerged since 1994, is perhaps what one could call “informal autobiographies”—ordinary black people writing down their own stories. But it invariably is also the story of a community as seen through the eyes of the narrator.

In *Deliver us from evil* Johnny Masilela tells of his childhood on a tobacco farm in a conservative Afrikaner community. The father, a strict disciplinarian and Christian, is the school principal and as such enjoys more respect from the white farmers than the labourers whose children he is educating. This is only one of the causes of tension in the narrative.

In *The hostel-dwellers* Rrekgetsi Chimeloane describes what life among the migrant mine-workers was like in the seventies. Arriving with a feeling of superiority toward these humble rural

men, he leaves with the understanding that these are the salt-of-the-earth types populating the works of Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo.

There are more such autobiographical stories, all of which reflect aspects of South African reality not explored in books before. And more significantly, not from the inside by people who experienced it first-hand. The interesting thing, once again, is that although everyone's life was in some way affected by apartheid, new writers do not dwell on it. Politics is somewhere in the background, never in the foreground like before the change-over in South Africa. It is also noticeable that the older writers seem to revisit the past, whereas "the bad old days" hardly features in the work of the young ones.

It is ironic that quite a few black writers who were building up a good writing reputation before 1994 now find themselves appointed to high office. The result is that people like Njabulo Ndebele and Mandla Langa have hardly produced anything significant the last five years.

#### *Afrikaans:*

The most significant development in Afrikaans fiction is the sudden emergence of quite a number of writers of colour. Amazingly enough, with the exception of one, all of them to date had an interrupted or incomplete school education. The most spectacular success is that of A H M Scholtz, who with only five years of formal schooling made his debut at the age of 72. His first novel, *Vatmaar* (in English: "Simply take"), won three major literary award and has very successfully been published in both a Dutch and a German translation. His second novel, *Afdraai*, ("Turn-off") is due to appear in Dutch and German soon.

It is interesting that all the coloured Afrikaans writers, even those of very humble origin, were immediately embraced by the Afrikaans "literary scene"—probably because many Afrikaans-speakers feel that the language is under threat, and that diversification can only strengthen its future. But a less cynical explanation would be that the division of the language community into "white" and "coloured" by the architects of apartheid was a

completely artificial one, and that people who should never have been divided are at last together again.

### Prospects for the future

That publishing for the general market in South Africa is beset with problems is clear. The most serious handicaps are a lack of a broad reading and book-buying culture, illiteracy and poverty.

On the other hand, South Africa is a country spear-heading the so-called African Renaissance, under the leadership of a man who knows the value of literature and often quotes from his favourite authors, among them Shakespeare. One can therefore assume that the collapse of the schoolbook and library market, which formerly made the publication of important but non-commercial books possible, will be temporary, and that there will soon be a concerted effort to encourage reading for leisure and self-development at school.

The revival of trade publishing by injecting large numbers of books into schools and public libraries is essential for a totally different reason as well. It is a sad fact that most big trade publishing houses in South Africa are still white-owned and run, and unless there is more money to be made from book publishing than is presently the case, this will remain so. Black entrepreneurs will simply not be motivated to invest in these ventures, and only when the ownership and management of publishing houses becomes as representative of the total population as the writing is becoming, will one be able to talk of a true democratisation of publishing and literature in South Africa.

So at the moment the most positive indication of a bright future, is the current wave of writing itself. Writing coming from writers emerging from historically disadvantaged communities; writers who are returning from exile and wish to publish their work in South Africa instead of abroad; established writers energised by new possibilities now that they no longer feel the pressure or obligation to write "politically correct" books.

And with the blossoming of fresh writing and talent, the broadening of genres and the exploration of new themes and settings; one looks forward to books written by people from every

shade of the rainbow, books that will look at the human side of politics, in the widest sense of the word, rather than at the narrow political side of humans!

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