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# *An Interview with Njabulo S. Ndebele (Cape Town, Aug. 17, 1998)*

***Professor, what were your motivations when you started writing? Were you writing out of protest, or out of a need to explore a certain art form?***

I think that when you start writing, it can be in response to certain personal or public circumstances. For example, when I grew up even in the townships, there were many books in my home. There were newspapers in the house, and my father subscribed to contemporary journals such as *Africa South* and *Classic Magazine*. Moreover, he was himself a writer of drama and a lover of art. There were Gerard Sekoto paintings hanging on the walls of my home. My father enjoyed discussing art and visiting art galleries. He also loved music, and would take us to plays when opportunity arose. I remember vividly the pleasure of watching *King Kong*, with Nathan Mdllele and Mirriam Makeba as lead performers, at the Great Hall of the University of the Witwatersrand in the late fifties.

So you can say therefore that there was something in my upbringing that led me, or pushed me towards the world of art. This kind of intimate exposure in my home could be considered extremely formative.

But beyond this formative experience, in which I was exposed to fiction, poetry, art, and music, I also became aware of the pressures of the wider world out there. For example, there was no way I could not notice the oppression of black people by the apartheid government, the economic disparities between blacks and whites, and between suburb and township. My family, our relatives, my friends, my neighbourhood, and myself were located in this world of shocking contrasts. So my early efforts at writing involved the discovery of art forms within an ever expanding consciousness and understanding of the wider world.

So at this point I can answer your question by recasting it: were you writing to highlight oppression and rouse indignation against it, or were you interested in exploring writing for its own sake?

The experience I have just described should indicate that one does not really make a choice. I think artists experience art forms and content simultaneously. The end product, at various stages of an artistic career is the measure of the artist's maturity both as a person and as an artist, in the face of strong surrounding social influences. The artist will swing this way and that depending on a number of influences at the time an artifact is being made. At a certain point, of course, the artist may even develop a philosophy which may provide a distinctive shape and character to the work.

***Could you tell us about the literary environment which nurtured your interest in writing? To what extent did it entice you to explore the form and write about the themes you first chose to deal with?***

Part of this question has already been answered. What I would want to add now is the excitement of discovering black writers. This happened in my home, but also took on greater dimensions while I was a student at St. Christopher's school in Swaziland in the sixties. As students, we discovered Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Alex la Guma, Can Themba... Later, when I went to University in Lesotho we came across Achebe, Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, Gabriel Okara, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others. In a traditional English literature curriculum devoted to Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth, Robert Browning, and others, this 'unofficial' world of African writing was extremely uplifting. The process of decolonisation was also underway. Discovering these writers gave me some role models who looked encouragingly familiar.

***What would strike you most, or what were you most sensitive to when reading those writers?***

Content was most striking. The sense of a familiar world. A familiar world being experienced as a subject of special reflection. It was wonderful having to apply my mind to a familiar environment through a writing assignment. I felt that I was making a contribution to a collective effort to understand our world. The life that we lived as Africans was being validated in a most special way. It was very affirming. The fact that up to that point all the books we studied at school, except for those in African

languages, had been written by and about Europeans with white characters and so on, the fact that up to that point that's all we had, enhanced the significance of our own world. I think this kind of revelation, this kind of opening up of awareness, is one of the most important points of contact between an art form and its viewer, or its reader, or its listener.

And then when we proceeded with the journey of discovery, our fascination increased. We discovered that there were African language arts traditions that had developed over many centuries, yielding us much poetry and epic.

We were also exposed to some of the great debates of the time in the wake of decolonisation. Why should Africans, who have their own languages, write in English or French, or Portuguese? Is it possible to write in English and succeed in expressing adequately an African world? Such discussions were triggered by such work as *The Palmwine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola and later *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara. Can non-Africans successfully interpret, as critics, the work of African writers? What is an African? There was the notion of the 'African Personality', and 'Negritude'. What is the role of the writer in society? What happened to Africans who were taken away from Africa to the Americas? In this connection, coming across a book such as *The Black Jacobins* by C.L.R. James, and reading it, was an unforgettable experience.

***At that time, you were more involved in poetry writing than in any other literary form. Why did you choose that art form in particular?***

Yes, when I started writing, I wrote poetry in Zulu. The very first poem I ever wrote was an imitation of Zulu poet, B. W. Vilakazi, whose work we were studying in High School at the time. This demonstrates very clearly that had the Zulu language been stronger than English as a language of education, of conversation on the school premises, of law and commerce, I would have most probably continued to write in Zulu without being aware of making a choice. But then the rest of the syllabus was taught in English. There were more books available in English than in Zulu. So, as I read more and more in English, reading the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Hardy, Hopkins, Eliot, Pound, Auden, and Dylan Thomas—many of these I read beyond the normal syllabus—I found myself writing in English. My first poem in English was an imitation of Browning. We read more poems than novels. There were simply more poems to

imitate than novels. So I wrote poetry because that, I suppose, was the most immediate art form which was available to me, which I could imitate; because when you start writing you are imitating most of the time, until your own voice emerges.

At about the same time, there was an interesting development in South Africa. The names of Oswald Mtshali, Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, began to emerge. These were emergent black poets. Black poetry began to flourish. I was a part of the movement. Once again, we can see how social trends can exert a very powerful impact on the capacity for exercising personal choice.

***Then you moved to fiction... Was it because poetry was not a strong enough vehicle for your ideas?***

The transition occurred in the seventies, as I went on to read a wide range of fiction by Camus, Forester, Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, Hemingway, Golding, Joyce, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Ousmane, Nwapa, Amadu, Head, Abrahams, Honwana, Ba, and numerous others. I began to develop a taste for a more expansive art form; something that worked less with tight, highly charged, suggestive images, but with more explicit description, more drawing of a picture with words. I wanted to create and describe a concrete world, rather than simply evoke or suggest it with images. I wanted the world created with words to resonate a lot more than the words used to create it.

***And what was your first work of fiction?***

A story called *Sarah, Rings and I*,<sup>1</sup> which was just published last year into a small booklet and is used to teach adult literacy through fiction. Considering that I wrote it in 1970, I was still a first year student in university. I guess it still reads nicely. It was first published in a magazine called *Expression* which I edited while a student at the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland.

***Then, where did you go from Lesotho?***

I first went to Cambridge, in Britain, having obtained a scholarship to study there, and spent two years there, from 1973 to 1975. I then returned to Lesotho and did some teaching. Later I travelled to the United States in

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<sup>1</sup> Kensington: Viva Books, 1993 (originally published in *Expression*, Lesotho, 1970).



1979 to study creative writing in Denver. I went there specifically because Eskia' Mphahlele, a graduate of the program who taught there, recommended the program highly. One of the oldest programs in creative writing in the United States, it had settled into a solid program in which aspirant writers wrote as well as rigorously studied the literary arts both as literature and as art. It is at that time that I wrote *Fools and Other Stories*.

***Do you think it would have been possible for you to write Fools in Lesotho or South Africa?***

That is really pure speculation. By the time I went to Denver, I was already wanting to write it. Very much so. So if I hadn't had the chance to go, I would probably have written it because I really wanted to. What Denver did was to provide me not only with an opportunity to do so, but also one in which to reflect and to enjoy an intimate interaction with fellow students, fellow creative writers and my teachers. It proved to be an extremely rich experience. So I probably could have written *Fools*... if I had stayed in Lesotho, but it could have taken longer; what with teaching, researching, and administration responsibilities to add to the task of writing. In Denver, the space provided enabled me to meet all the requirements within the minimum time required.

***Does that suggest that to you, place is not important with regard to creative writing?***

It is not an absolutely essential condition. Place is a factor of convenience rather than a determinant of the drive to produce a work of art. It can also be a matter of personal preference. Wherever you are, you can have tranquility or disturbance, but retain the drive to produce a work of art.

But there are times when I have wanted to get out of a place in order to understand it better. So *distance* can enable one to see the reality one comes from more clearly than if one was actually there. The imagination can produce clearer and more compelling pictures. I am glad that I was away from home when I wrote *Fools*.

The problem of place though can become a major factor in determining the depth of imaginative recall. For example, when you have been in exile for too long, your image of your country can get trapped in your last impressions of it. It's much like if you last saw someone as child, and you are told that she is now a married woman. It's difficult to visualise the

married woman beside the more static, and more enduring, picture of that little girl. Usually, the picture of the little girl becomes romanticised.

So while distance can give you imaginative clarity, at a certain point the object begins to go faint and become less real. Some balance needs to be maintained.

***Is this pressure, or crucial balance an echo to the concept of "internal exile" you mentioned in a recently published essay?***<sup>2</sup>

Yes, people did not have to leave the country to become alienated from it. Internal movement, particularly one forced by circumstances of work and the mass removals of social engineering, can produce the psychology of exile. The place you were forced to leave becomes idealised over time. It becomes the promised land, where the grass is always greener. It becomes an escape from the strife you are facing where you are located. That is why returning home can often be a traumatic experience. That happens when you are shocked into realising hell is everywhere, because the place you left, which remained in your mind a source of constancy and enduring, comforting stability has also been changing, and has all the problems you associated with the place of exile.

***With regard to the creative activity of writing, you said formerly that the Fools story was already in your mind and that being in Denver enabled you to materialize it. Could you explain the process at stake when for instance, your collection of short stories Fools... was being developed?***

The activity of writing can be exciting and painful, depending on what you're trying to do, where or at which part the story is. Normally when I start writing, I may have a pretty good idea how the story should, or is going to, end. But I will have no clue how to traverse the distance between the beginning and the end. The pleasure and the pain of writing lie precisely there. The thing is to start writing until a pattern unfolds. The creative process is one good illustration of chaos theory. A number of possibilities come at you as you follow your story. Others fall by the way side because there is no logic of circumstances around them to lead to significant narrative ends. Any significant logic of narrative circumstances which emerges, literally becomes a narrative attractor around which, and

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<sup>2</sup> "A home for intimacy."

from which, further events are generated. Sometimes you reach the attractor soon, sometimes you have to fumble your way well into the writing.

The hardest thing is to develop the discipline to sit at your desk even when you have no clue what to write. Something finally comes along. You have to learn to live with debilitating moments of imaginative paralysis. But they come and go. Sit there. If you go away you may never return. Of course, this is putting it too strongly, because it is your urge to find form that keeps you going.

At some point once the story is flowing, the world of the narrative becomes so real that you begin to live fully in that world. That happens when you start missing your characters, because you have to go away and rest. When I talk about “real,” I don’t mean as in “real life.” I mean “real” in terms of the narrative logic of the story. If people in your story hop on their heads to get around, you have to keep it that way, in such a way that the hopping around on their heads is normal and real in terms of the story.

***It is because of that that you seem to focus more on characterization, and on characters’ introspection rather than on plot?***

Not necessarily. Narrative strategies are determined by a driving philosophical intention. My attempt *Fools* was partly to react against the tendency of the apartheid state to reduce black people to faceless units of labour. Where they live is a place where they go to sleep, eat, and procreate, bringing into the world the next generation of labour units. My narrative strategy therefore was to work towards specificity of character and setting. To bring out individuals, families and communities where there was assumed to be an undifferentiated mass of humans.

Also, I wanted to employ a narrative strategy that does not end in closure. Such a strategy is intended to encourage a continuing dialogue with the narrative long after it has been read. One of my favourite endings is that of ‘The Prophetess’<sup>3</sup> where the boy has broken a bottle of holy water he has fetched from the Prophetess to cure his mother. He quickly fills another bottle with water and presents it to his mother as if had been blessed. She drinks, thinking it is holy water and admits to feeling better as a result of the water almost immediately. The boy has fooled his mother but at the same time he has cured her. What is the meaning of this?

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<sup>3</sup> in *Fools and Other Stories*.



***As I see it, as the reader of your stories proceeds, he/she goes through a healing process, whether he be black, or white?***

Yes. Discovering similar experience in others always humanizes one's responses to strangers. It always results in increased fellowship. This is the thing about the universal and the particular, that what is universal always comes out of the specific.

***But what can be made of those strategies in post-apartheid South Africa? In a recent essay on the hearings at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), you suggested that Reverend Desmond Tutu's calling these accounts "stories" was revealing, for those "stories" could be the basis for a new form a national literature. To what extent could these "stories" offer the possibility to stage the notion of "shared experience" through literature?***

That essay was called "The Triumph of Narrative." I think the TRC has brought back the art of storytelling. The story of apartheid was so difficult to write because by its nature it forced human beings to live in a state of denial. If you reported that "I was tortured," the state would force you to deny that experience by threatening your very life. You had to deny the testimony of your own experience. Only the state could tell what was happening. And then it would itself engage in outrageous activities which it would have to deny, and force everyone else to participate in the denial.

What the TRC did was to validate those individual experiences. People had the opportunity for the first time to say: "I was really badly treated, this is what happened to me." Telling the story for the first time in these hearings restored the human reality of suffering. Human suffering was authenticated in a special way.

Equally significantly was the restoration of the human reality of cruelty. The people who admitted to torturing others, abducting and killing, turned out to be fathers, brothers, and members of church congregations. Cruelty became much more than what a government does. But because these events now come back at us as stories, there is a distancing effect which makes them metaphor. This making of metaphor was difficult in the past because horror and metaphor in the apartheid state became one. It is difficult to achieve artistic distance where reality and metaphor have merged. The resulting effort tended to yield banality.

The TRC testimonies, seen as they were on television, served to ritualistically confirm to all South Africans the terrible reality of apartheid, which was known but denied. They represent the formal reversal of denial. At the same time, they walk into the national consciousness as a common human reality. So there is the opportunity to do that now, which I think was not there before, as far as literature was concerned.

***Could you go as far as to write about a white character and his experience then?***

Well, I could, but I would have to do a lot of research. When you write about people whose entire social experience you have not had, technical competence will not save you. You've got to reach out towards that dimension of representation which resonates with authenticity. So one can start off from the confessions of a torturer and work one's way towards the inner being in the context of family and community. It may require, like any good actor will tell you, to spend sometime with your subject. So I think it would take a massive exercise of imagination to do it in a way that I would find satisfying, but it is possible.

***Professor Ndebele, thank you very much.***

My pleasure.

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*Njabulo Ndebele est l'auteur de Fools and Other Stories<sup>5</sup>, recueil de cinq nouvelles mettant en scène des incidents de vie quotidienne dans les townships et explorant les contradictions, les désirs et aspirations frustrés et la psychologie du peuple noir sud-africain. Publié en 1983, il a été réédité pour la onzième fois en 1996 chez Ravan Press, et la nouvelle principale "Fools" a été portée à l'écran par le cinéaste sud-africain Ramadam Suleiman. Il est également l'auteur d'une œuvre majeure de critique littéraire sud-africaine : South African Literature and Experience : Rediscovery of the Ordinary<sup>6</sup>. Il a présidé l'University of the North pendant quatre ans, de 1994 à août 1998. Invité en tant qu'enseignant-chercheur par la Ford Foundation de New York, il travaille actuellement à l'écriture de son premier roman.*



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<sup>5</sup> Johannesburg : Ravan Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> New York : Manchester University Press, 1991.