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# *Ethnic Consciousness and Multiculturalism in Njabulo Ndebele's fiction*

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Ndebele's creative writing has its roots in the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s. Coming into existence after the banning of major South African anti-apartheid political organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960, the Black Consciousness Movement quickly became a vibrant politico-cultural organisation that brought together black students, cultural workers and political activists for a concerted action designed to rebuild their shattered self and fight against the ever repressive apartheid regime. As contained in the Black Students' Manifesto, "the basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Black man must build up his value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others."<sup>2</sup> In accordance with this philosophy of self-rebuilding, Steve Biko, one of the movement's most notable leaders, promoted the concept of "an inward-looking process" amongst the oppressed Black South Africans.<sup>3</sup>

These revivalist ideas were equally given artistic expression by Black South African writers who gained prominence in the 1970s such as Sipho Sepamla, Oswald Mtshali, Mongane Serote, Mandla Langa, Mafika Gwala, Mothobi Mutloase, Ahmed Essop, Miriam

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Sipho Buthelezi, "The Emergence of Black Consciousness: An Historical Appraisal". *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. Eds. N. B. Pityana, M. Ramphele, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Biko. *I Write what I like* (London: Bouverdean Press, 1978), 29.

Tlali, Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane and a host of others. In sharp contrast to the protest literature of their predecessors of the 1950s and 1960s, the writings of the Black Consciousness generation were, in the words of Mzamane, "addressed directly and primarily to the downtrodden and oppressed. Their aim was to liberate their people as much from white oppression as from their own selves: from the self-inflicted pain and sufferings, and the senseless and devastating violence of the townships."<sup>4</sup> Black Consciousness writers did not, therefore, base their writings on the spectacular or the emotional; they rather dwelt on the resilient energy that characterised the "ordinary" life of the oppressed.

Following his dissatisfaction with South African protest literature, which he saw as promoting "a fixed and unhistorical image"<sup>5</sup> of Black South Africans, Ndebele has endeavoured in his creative writings "to bring into the active consciousness of the oppressed, through a total evocation of their life, an active philosophical interest in the complex dialectic of human existence."<sup>6</sup> The "total evocation" of people's life here includes a detailed analysis of the state of their consciousness of history and tradition as manifested in their daily living, aspirations and deprivations. Indeed, as will be seen in the rest of this essay, history and tradition function as important restorative factors in the lives of the oppressed in Ndebele's fiction.

In his collection of short stories entitled *Fools and Other Stories*<sup>7</sup> through a detailed depiction of "the ordinary" as manifested, for example, in man's relationship with nature, Ndebele provides an important framework within which one can effectively read the entire South African history and appreciate its restorative potential for both the oppressed and the oppressors. In "Fools," for instance, the two yew trees, which stand "at the apex of a high hill" overlooking all the racially divided sections of the population in Charterston, constitute an important symbol in that regard. As teacher Zamani, the subjective narrator of the story, describes it in the following passage, which is quoted at length because of its importance to the discussion of this essay,

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<sup>4</sup> M. V. Mzamane. "The Impact of Black Consciousness on Culture". *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness*. Eds. N. B. Pityana, M. Ramphela, M. Mpumlwana and L. Wilson (Cape Town: David Philip 1991), 183.

<sup>5</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (Johannesburg: COSAW, 1991), 158.

<sup>6</sup> Ndebele, *ibid.*, 159.

<sup>7</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele. *Fools and Other Stories* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1983).

At the end of Moshoeshoe Street was the Presbyterian Church. Beyond, about two hundred yards away, were the Indian and Coloured sections of Charterston. In the distance, still rather hazy under a thin veil of mist, was one of the ancient landmarks of the township: two yew trees at the apex of a high hill. They were known as the "eternal twins," and had been there for as long as anybody in township history could remember. I wanted to go out to them, but I felt unprepared. Taking on that distance needed the kind of resolve which, like going on a pilgrimage, has to be preceded by spiritual and mental preparation. So I was content to stop at the fence that went round Charterston, keeping the Indians and the Coloureds out, and to take a rest while I looked at the "eternal twins," high on their hill. (*F*, 261)

Because they are "eternal," these trees stand as timeless historical landmarks, which have witnessed the turbulent transformation of South African society from the pre-apartheid era to the present. They also function as protective signs warning people against both a further deterioration of their society and a possible repetition of a negative history in the future. The two trees would, therefore, "remain there gazing, until a new day gave them a new voice." (*F*, 262) The trees are indeed calling for a reconciliation of the disjointed society with the harmony, purity and unity which they represent as unpolluted elements of nature.

Teacher Zamani's reluctance to approach the trees because of his rot, the mist that blurs not only his own but also other people's clear vision of the trees, as well as his personal confession that he needs a lot of "spiritual and mental preparation" before he attempts to undertake a meaningful pilgrimage towards them, are strong indications that the trees provide a model of existence that can lead to a positive re-creation of the shattered historical and social consciousness of the inhabitants of Charterston township. These trees have endured and are able to inspire society because of their successful combination of both "the arborescent" and "the rhizomatic" dimensions of existence. While each tree has drawn a great part of its nourishment from its own roots (the arborescent dimension), both have also depended on each other (their twinness / rhizomatic dimension) for sustenance as "they stood together in eternal companionship through days and nights and weeks and months and years." (*F*, 261)

Ndebele's articulation of the possibility of a successful combination of "the arborescent" and "the rhizomatic" through this symbol contrasts with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's perception of the two concepts as irreconcilable parallel discourses. In *A Thousand Plateaus* both maintain that "a rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is

the conjunction, 'and ... and ... and ...' This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be.'<sup>8</sup> Following this theorising, Deleuze and Guattari locate what they call "the plane of consistency of multiplicities"<sup>9</sup> firmly in the rhizomatic territory. The signification of Ndebele's story, however, relocates this space of actualisation of multiplicities at the meeting point of "the arborescent" and "the rhizomatic." In this space all the connecting elements are involved in a subjective relationship as the two yew trees in Ndebele's story are. Here although the initial strength of the verb "to be" is somewhat undermined by the rhizomatic pressure, it nevertheless survives. This democratic space, which features in different forms in almost all Ndebele's stories, corresponds to what he calls "that area of cultural autonomy," made up of complex and dynamic laws that "no oppressor can ever get at."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, seeking to free themselves from the shackles of cruel political and social institutions, which have undermined and destroyed their history and tradition, Ndebele's main characters in the collection of short stories under discussion here advocate a journey into their people's interiority as a major strategy for reconstituting their subjectivity. It is this journey into "the self" that Teacher Zamani, for example, calls "mental and spiritual preparation." Because the journey is seen as a strategic preparation for a grand overture and productive connections, it cannot be perceived as a sterile inward-looking exercise. The knowledge of "the self" in this context rebuilds and transforms the oppressed into vibrant subjects, while at the same time preparing them to recognise "the other;" in other words it prepares them for a great exteriority. This "inward process," to use Biko's words, plays two functions in Ndebele's fiction. It seeks to revive the oppressed people's links with their roots, while at the same time interrogating the relevance of the outside order of knowledge to this revival process.

In "Fools," for example, coming from Ohlange Teacher Training School, "full of new ideas, and dying to change the township and put some life into it." (*F*, 165) Teacher Zamani decides to organise a boy scout movement, tries to destroy the oppressive Church institution and attempts to reshape African children's consciousness by teaching them

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<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 25.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ndebele, *Rediscovery*, 159.



their true history. Unfortunately he fails in all these scores because of the inadequate strategies he adopts.

Knowing well that since 1953 with the introduction of the notorious Bantu Education Act, the minds of African children in South Africa have been locked up in an inadequate school system regulated by apartheid, Teacher Zamani tactically decides to initiate the transformation of his people's lives by founding a popular movement, the boy scout movement. Such a movement would have certainly provided Africans with a useful space of intervention for the effective liberation of African children's imagination and the moulding of their subjectivity. It would have led them to realise the inadequacy of the system that has held them and their parents in an objective position, just as it would have prepared them to work towards the liberation of their society. Unfortunately, Teacher Zamani fails to carry out with his project as he yields to the pressure of another imprisoning and debilitating institution, the local churches which compete for him "as they always competed for the allegiance of handsome young teachers." (F, 166)

However, later on inspired by Zani, a brilliant young matriculant, who has just come from a boarding school in Swaziland, Teacher Zamani shows some signs of recovery as far as his earlier vision of public responsibility is concerned. In negation of the white man's limited and one-sided history of South Africa, he decides to reshape the consciousness of his school children by teaching them their people's past achievements in history, going as far back as ancient Egypt. The idea here is, to use Ndebele's word, "to put before the minds of the oppressed the historical image of a legitimate and well organised social life. That is to say, an image of a civilisation built by their ancestors. This was done in order to suggest that the organised social strivings of the past could be repeated."<sup>11</sup> But here again his teaching is in vain, because he chooses an imprisoning and imprisoned system and locus as opposed to a popular milieu for imparting this important knowledge. The school is so regulated by apartheid that it does not allow any deterritorialising discourse to take place in it. The only kind of knowledge that is allowed there is the one that confirms the whites' sense of superiority over the blacks, as contained, for example, in the recommended textbooks of South African history. The misguided principal of the school, Mr Lehamo, has become himself an embodiment of the oppressive system which imprisons African children's minds and hinders the development of their subjectivity. This can be seen

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<sup>11</sup> Ndebele, *Rediscovery*, 123.

through his fanatical admiration of Dr Verwoerd, the main architect of apartheid, whose picture hanging on the wall of his office betrays a feeling of malice.<sup>12</sup>

Teacher Zamani's constant refuge in the world of imported knowledge of outdated old books and women at the expense of his family unity also makes him a tragic figure. Instead of regarding the family as an important social unit and a people's cherished traditional institution on whose foundation any meaningful reshaping of subjectivity should develop, he is seen virtually destroying it. He keeps a distance from Nosipho, his motherly, loving and patient wife, rapes school girls, has affairs with other women, drinks excessively, degenerates and loses the capacity to transform the lives of his people and successfully lead them to "the plane of consistency of multiplicities" represented by the yew trees. Pointing out his failure in this regard, Nosipho says to him:

Let me tell you something, . . . You are the very picture of a man who has given in. All the self-respect you had! Threw it away without a fight. All the respect people had for you! . . . And then the women. And then the drinking. And then night after night of absences. And you know what? . . . To sympathise with you would be to destroy you further. No. You should be given what you have most desired: contempt. And then your greatest salvation: the contempt of your woman. (*F*, 200)

What is, however, remarkable with Ndebele's main characters, like Teacher Zamani and Zani, is the fact that, in spite of their crippled state of mind and personal rot, they always show signs of strong potential for revival. Both Ndebele and his reader never completely lose hope in them, as the possibility of their revival seems always certain. It is because of this potential that Teacher Zamani readily surrenders his role as a teacher to Zani, who in all respects should have been his pupil. Impressed by Zani's outstanding analysis of both his people's objective position and his own failure to change their lives, teacher Zamani does not hesitate to humble himself before him:

His eyes, his face, drew me to him; not because of the same pain and helplessness I had seen in them in the waiting room, but because I had a real feeling that I had before me, for the first time in my life, someone who genuinely felt sorry for me. At that moment I was seized by a deep feeling of contrition. So rarely in my life had I felt so small before a young person. (*F*, 165)

Zani, the eighteen year-old South African matriculant coming from a liberal boarding school in Swaziland also understands, like Teacher Zamani, that since 1953 the minds of

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<sup>12</sup> Ndebele, *Rediscovery*, 176.

Africans in South Africa have been confined by a limited education system designed to undermine Black people's history and tradition, and keep them permanently in a subserviently objective position. He has a clear realisation of the destructive effects that both apartheid laws and imported values have had on the lives of his people in Charterston and deplores the passive and self-destructive attitudes of school teachers and principals, like teacher Zamani and principal Lehamo, whom he calls "Masters of avoidance" and "killers of dreams." (F, 164) So, vowing to avoid Teacher Zamani's tragic course, he hopes to revive his people's subjectivity by reawakening their awareness of history through books. He therefore says to Teacher Zamani: "Yes . . . I do have bricks in this suitcase, Tee. But they are bricks of a certain kind. With them I do not build houses; I build the mind." (F, 171) Ironically it is here that his tragedy lies.

Believing that Charterston is "stagnant," and that its inhabitants are completely destroyed, Zani does not see any potential for a vibrant transformation within the rank of the oppressed themselves. He believes that salvation for his people must come solely from an outside source of knowledge and as such is hardly aware of the healing potential of women such as his mother, MaButhelezi, his girlfriend Ntozakhe and Nosipho. Nor does he realise and exploit the possibilities offered by his people's subtle resistance to apartheid through their popular culture and other activities in their day to day life. Instead he sees them as "finished bodies":

"I believe in science," he said. "Scientists, after vigorous experiments have shown the harmfulness of smoking. Who are we to ignore their findings? They have shown too, that our people are terribly undernourished. Very little protein in their diet. But no, not only are their bodies wasting away everyday, they have to destroy their lungs also. And all the white man has to do afterwards is just push us over. Look at the human wrecks they throw away to the homelands to die. Finished bodies, finished lungs, finished minds, finished spirits. All because we have been enemies to science!" (F, 164)

With this arrogant and one-sided disposition inspired by his total reliance on the external source of knowledge, Zani distances himself from the people he wants to transform, fails to examine their lives critically, becomes a lonely figure as he shuns even the company of his mature girlfriend Ntozakhe, and virtually dooms his well intended vision to failure. As Ntozakhe, who sees Zani as a "caged lion" imprisoned in his narrow vision of the notion of truth tells him in a letter, "Sometimes I think you don't understand yourself. Nor do you understand those you are seeking to change." (F, 252)



Zani's stabbing by one of his people after he has insulted the latter of having the mind of a chicken should be seen as an invitation for him to come down into the lives of the oppressed. Indeed, this stabbing is salutary as it undermines the distance that has separated Zani from the "ordinary," humbles him and takes him through the healing ritual daily experienced by his people in the hands of women like his mother and Nosipho. It is significant that it is only after he has been stabbed that Zani submits himself to both Nosipho and Ntozakhe, whose letter he drops in Teacher Zamani's house, for a re-education process. In fact this letter and Nosipho's healing counsel to Zani outline the restorative function of women in Charterston. Explaining her idea of healing as derived from her people's tradition, Nosipho says to Zani:

The thing is there are those of us who consider that healing people is not just a matter of X-rays, needles, and drips. No. It is also restoring that person to a complete human balance: to make him a father again, or a mother again, or an uncle again. To make a person continue to wonder about the world and his place in it. (*F*, 238)

Nosipho's wholesome vision here contrasts with that of Zani who in repudiating Ntozakhe's suggestion of a possible marriage between them and showing his pathetic imprisonment in the external source of knowledge, says: "But how can I continue to love her? What will happen to all my dreams if they are to be lost in bringing up a child? And what will be the meaning of the matriculation exams I have just written?" (*F*, 207) However, after the stabbing he recognises that Ntozakhe is "the heart of my heart" (*F*, 205), confesses to teacher Zamani that "your wife . . . your wife . . . she's so wonderful . . . she is so wonderful. I wish I could hold her hands forever;" (*F*, 279) and seeks the assistance of a popular meat seller, Ndabeni, for an effective propagation of his consciousness — re-awakening ideas.

Re-reading South African history from an African perspective and determined to revive his people's undermined subjectivity through this process, Zani invites all the inhabitants of Charterston to meditate on and rethink the significance of Dingane's Day or Day of the Covenant which started on 16 December 1838. He effectively does so by writing and placing posters containing his call for a rethink of history all over the township a day before the actual remembrance day:

The township had woken up that morning to find many handwritten posters placed all over. Written with a black felt pen across standard type-writing paper was: DAY OF THE COVENANT: STAY HOME AND THINK. And on others: DINGANE'S DAY: STAY HOME AND THINK. (*F*, 211)

One of the posters placed in the lavatory of Principal Lehamo's school and brought into Teacher Zamani's classroom by Daniel, one of the students, has an important visual symbol showing how both Africans and the colonisers got cut off from their life-giving roots by what can be called the faulted connection of the invasion of Africa, as represented in this instance by Dingane's day and Boers' Treks. On this poster, as Teacher Zamani reports,

The drawing was too elaborate. It was a drawing of a penis completely inside a vagina, such that even the testicles seemed to be struggling to go in too. I had seen many such drawings before, and what always struck me was not so much the organs themselves, but that they almost always had no people attached to them. They were just organs locked into each other like discarded nuts and bolts. (*F*, 212)

The faulted connection depicted through this visual image has led to the destruction of both the rapers (Whites) and the raped (Africans), and it stands in opposition to the space of actualisation of multiplicities projected in the relationship between the twin trees mentioned above. Zani thus joins the teacher in thinking that their people need a mental preparation, a rebuilding of themselves before engaging "the others" in a parity relationship. He therefore rightly thinks, like teacher Zamani, that he must start with the children for "They must be caught young." (*F*, 190)

It is with this vision that Zani goes to teacher Zamani's classroom to teach children the meaning and origin of Dingane's day, the day which principal Lehamo wants them to celebrate:

I want to talk to you about the Day of the Covenant. They used to call it Dingane's Day. Why the change of name? I will tell you. You will know from your history that on the sixteenth of December, 1838, there was the Battle of Blood River when the Boers killed thousands of our people. Our people were ruled by King Dingane at the time. And from that time, the Boers called that day Dingane's Day. It was a day to commemorate death. And every year on that day, the Boers went out into the streets marching with guns and bugles, clearing the streets of any Africans. Death. The Day of death and vengeance! The commemoration of death and blood.

.....

But even the Boers can undergo some refinement. With the passage of time, the ritual of physical cruelty becomes cumbersome; and it has to be dignified with something abstract. Now we have the Day of the Covenant. For the Boers tell us that on that day they prayed to their Christian God and said: "Lord of Lords! Father of David! If You can help us win this war, if You can help us finish off the savages, we will build You a church; we will build You a country that will reflect Your day, and live in solid fear of You." Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the Church of blood and death, a country of fear and oppression. When evil becomes a philosophy or a religion, it becomes rational or spiritual malice: the highest forms of depravity. Do you hear what I'm saying? Do you understand what I'm saying. (*F*, 216)

Here again Zani's intention is laudable, but the mode of communication and the place he chooses to impart this knowledge are inappropriate. There is no wonder, therefore, that "the children just stared back at him" (*F*, 217) in total confusion after his lecture. Zani's adoption of a formal and highly rhetorical level of discourse to communicate with primary school children, as well as his choice of an apartheid-regulated institution of knowledge for his address, dooms his important message to failure. As Teacher Zamani laments, "He had become his books, and when he moved out of them, he came out without a social language . . . I wondered if he was not another instance of disembodiment: the obscenity of high seriousness." (*F*, 217) The result of his ineffective methodology in an imprisoning classroom contrasts with the relative success of his effective communication with children through Ndabeni, the meat seller, who uses his popular chant "First grade" to draw the attention of the crowd to Zani's placard about the Day of Covenant as both of them ride on Ndabeni's bicycle through the streets of Charterston. Ndabeni's association with Zani brings him closer to the people he wants to transform than he has been at the beginning of the story. There is thus an element of hope in the story in spite of the harassment of the police, the principal, and the Boers, who try to frustrate and block his transformative initiatives. The fact that the Boer, who beats up the principal and Teacher Zamani and chases away Zani from the picnic ground, weeps after inflicting pain on the first two, demonstrates his recognition of his people's sin. The weeping also indicates that the Boer also acknowledges the need for his people to undertake a journey into their interiority in order to prepare themselves for a positive connection with "the others."

In the story "Uncle," Uncle Lovington is also guided by the same transformative drive comparable to that of Teacher Zamani and Zani. Unlike these two, however, he uses an effective approach (popular culture) to communicate with the masses, understands them very well and shows himself to be one of them. Deploring and rebelling against his father's sterile devotion to the cause of an oppressive Church that does not serve the community, Uncle decides to devote his energy towards rebuilding his people's subjectivity by rejuvenating their existential energy, uniting them for an effective struggle and reconciling them with their tradition and history through their popular culture of music. In his criticism of his father, the Presbyterian priest, Uncle says:

His message did not reverberate with the strength of our experience. He skirted our lives like a train avoiding another train at a siding. There would be echoes from one train to the other, but they were still separate trains. Prayer must fill us with the zeal to change the quality of our lives in every respect. If it does not do that it is a waste of time. And this means that prayer



must deal with our lives and hammer home to us the need to go out there and smash everything for change. And if God does not ask us to do that He is not our God.

Mshana, I have what he never had, your grandfather. I have always been close to people. And when I rebelled I was with them even more. (*F*, 104)

Thus, by breaking away from the confining milieu of the church and school, Uncle undertakes a journey into his people's interiority through the landscape of history and tradition in order to prepare himself and ultimately his people for a significant outward journey towards a positive culture of multiplicity. In the course of this preparation, Uncle seeks refuge in an informal learning set-up in the house of an Indian Moslem located "in the vibrant world of Fordsburg, in Johannesburg." (*F*, 105) Here for five years, he learns Arabic and accumulates knowledge of the African past in ancient Egypt. And refusing to be confined by Islamic religion, as his teacher is, Uncle goes on to study the Egyptian language and enriches himself more and more in the wisdom of his roots. He tells "mshana," his eleven year-old nephew and narrator of the story, when explaining to him the relevance of his people's past in the reshaping of their present and future:

This is the Egyptian language. In this language "mshana," is written all the ancient wisdom of Africa. Know that. From Egypt we gave our glory to the world. Now it is time that we get it back. I am learning this language so that I can find more by myself. There must be no-one between myself and this wisdom. The coming glory should be mine. It should be ours, "mshana," and all that will be in the way of our glory must be smashed. (*F*, 105)

Informed by this knowledge, Uncle puts his musical talents in the service of his community. He re-educates and unites them through it, and tries "to smash things with it. And as the music smashes something, it builds something else." (*F*, 105-106) Brother Mandla, the eminent Charterston artist, who returns to his roots for inspiration after what he has regarded as a barren sojourn in Johannesburg, acknowledges the vital energy of Uncle's music and its quality as a healing antidote to the community in a piece of painting. Showing the painting to Uncle and describing its unifying function, Brother Mandla tells him:

This is how you are when you play the trumpet. When you play you are exaggerated. You are bigger than what you normally are because you have become all those who are listening to you. . . . We all go into you and swell you up as we cheer you and you take us all in, and you become stronger and stronger the more you play. And we all become powerfully one. (*F*, 78)

Unlike Zani, who uses an ineffective, formal and classroom-derived discourse in his interaction with the masses, Uncle descends to the level of the eleven-year-old "mshana" and



uses appropriate didactic means from his people's tradition and environment (spirits, light, stones, ancestors, volcano) to teach the latter the relevance of his African people's past exploits and values to his life. For example, using as a starting point the homework that "mshana" brings home from an unsatisfactory and mind-confining school system on "places I would like to visit," Uncle enlarges his nephew's horizons and successfully unlocks his imagination. In this instance the informal home-learning environment produces a better result than the soul-destroying school in shaping the young boy's vision of the world around him and the role he is to play as a vibrant subject in the transformation of his society. The following passage shows how effectively Uncle inculcates the notion of "the self" in his nephew's mind:

Uncle comes to sit next to me and we look at the map of South Africa. "Show me Bloemfontein... yes... That is where your grandmother and grandfather are. Your uncles. Your younger mothers. They are all there. That is the centre of your life too. Your mother had to come home before you were born because you were her first born. And that is where I buried your umbilical cord. Right there in the yard. Wherever you are in the world, you must return to that yard. Now show me Johannesburg... yes... That is where Uncle bought his trumpet. Now look at this: Ladysmith, Pietermaritzburg, Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Kimberley, Pietersburg, Middelburg, Witbank, Pretoria, Springs, Germiston. All foreign names: but that will change in time. This whole land, 'mshana', I have seen it all. And I have given it music. You too must know this land. The whole of it, and find out what you can give it. So you must make a big map of the country, your own map. Soon you will have a map full of places. And they will be your places. And it will be your own country. And then you must ask yourself: What can I give to all those places? And when you have found the answer, you will know why you want to visit those places." (F, 66)

"Mshana," Doksi and Wanda seem particularly disposed for this type of education as they yearn to assert their subjectivity in the face of strong oppressive forces represented by the heat, poverty, class-stratification, police and disunity in their community. These boys' unity pact as well as their teaming up together with Uncle to defeat Nzule, the bully of the community, is a significant demonstration by Ndebele that only the bringing together of all the human and material resources of the oppressed can effectively resist and finally defeat any form of oppression in the community. Indeed, only this strategy can successfully liberate and lead the masses of Charterston and the whole South Africa, as respectable subjects, to a concert of multiplicities such as the one put together by Uncle Lovington at the end of the story "Uncle." Functioning as the projected "plane of consistency of multiplicities," represented by the "twin trees" in "Fools," the concert brings together different but equal sounds. Mshana says:

I start the record. And soon Uncle is playing the trumpet. He waits until the record has started and then plays along with it. And there is dancing again. The crowd is increasing. I am proud. I am proud that they have come to my home. When the miners reach us they do not stop their music; they play on. And there is the gramophone, there is the trumpet, there is the concertina, there is the guitar, there is the mouth organ, and there is the voice of people singing. People are sweating, the sun gleaning off their faces. And everybody is doing the "setapo" now. (F, 121)

This fertile space of connections is also effectively represented in the story entitled "The Prophetess," where, putting religion in the service of the community, the prophetess turns it into an empowering and healing instrument. To this extent her vision of religion differs significantly from that of other religious figures such as Reverend Shezi in "Fools" and Uncle's father in "Uncle," whose practices isolate them from the community. She subverts the isolationist position of the church and its representation in isolated buildings, bringing it into her home and integrating it into her African tradition. The house therefore functions as a space of articulation of multiplicities where Western and African cultures, the mask and Jesus meet in an arborescent-rhizomatic relationship. This is how the omniscient narrator in the story describes the house of the prophetess while reflecting the awe experienced in it by the boy who comes in search of holy water to heal his mother:

The boy relaxed somewhat, vaguely feeling safe because the prophetess knew his mother. This made him look away from the prophetess for a while, and he saw that there was a huge mask on the wall just opposite her. It was shining and black. It grinned all the time showing two canine teeth pointing upwards. About ten feet away at the other side of the wall was a picture of Jesus in which His chest was open, revealing His heart which had many shafts of light radiating from it. (F, 39-40)

In fact, the holy water, sanctified by the prayer inspired and offered by the prophetess's integrated consciousness, becomes a device that is to revive black people's subjectivity.

The prophetess's prayer and the accompanying rituals do not only sanctify the healing holy water, they also empower the seeker of this water to produce his own holy water out of the ordinary one, as the boy does. Her prayer therefore frees the oppressed from an objective position and turns them into vibrant subjects. Indeed it invites and enables everyone to be the healer of the community. Here is how the prophetess prays for the boy, his mother and the whole community:

Lord, Lord, Lord . . . have mercy on the desert in our hearts and in our thoughts. Have mercy. Bless this water, fill it with your power; and may it bring rebirth. Let her (the boy's mother) and all others who will drink of it feel the flower of newness spring alive in them; let those who drink it, break the chains of despair, and may they realise that the desert wastes are really not barren, but that the vast sands that stretch into the horizon are the measure of the seed in us. (*F*, 43)

The fertile order projected by the prophetess's harmonious integration of Christianity into African tradition stands in contradiction to and negates the tension between the empirical, exclusive Western order of discourse and the accommodating African beliefs in the story. Ndebele skilfully depicts this tension by bringing together two groups of Africans representing the two epistemological orders (the Western and the African) for a dialogue in a bus that takes the boy and three of his friends home from town. Challenging the "tall dark man" who convincingly believes that "not even a cow can tear away from" the magic glue that the prophetess is believed to have put on her vine in order to catch thieves who come to steal her grapes in the night, a woman in the bus asks: "Have you ever seen a person caught there? Just answer this one question?" (*F*, 33) However, before the man can answer her question, she quickly draws a host of resisting responses from other passengers. A young boy says: "I have heard of one silly chap that got caught!" And when the woman further questions: "when?... Exactly when, I say? who was that person?" a "general chorus of women" say and repeat: "These things really happen!" (*F*, 34) Soon the challenger also has her rank swollen by an immaculately dressed young nurse who states, in support of the woman's argument: "The truth is you have no proof. None of you. Have you ever seen anybody caught by this prophetess? Never. It's all superstition." (*F*, 35) The challenge by the woman to an African traditional practice here represents the territorising tendency of the Western, modern order of discourse, which has constantly sought to undermine the African "otherness." The truth of the matter is that whether or not somebody has actually seen anybody trapped on the vine, the validity of this belief, which lies in its objective popular result as a deterrent, cannot be contested. By this belief, selfish individuals in the community are prevented from appropriating to themselves that (in this case the grapes) which is meant for all or that which is not theirs. It is therefore thanks to that important belief that, as the narrator says, "That vine; it was on the lips of everyone in the township every summer." (*F*, 33)

Certainly a blind and exclusive adoption of an alien order of discourse such as this turns the challenging woman and the young nurse into one-dimensional robots with a narrow vision of the notion of truth. It is this blindness and imprisonment that constitute the "desert wastes" that the prophetess is trying to cure in the people of Charterston with her



holy water. The woman's sceptical attitude towards African beliefs here contrasts with that of the boy's mother, staff nurse Masemola, who, asserting her subjectivity within the validity of her people's experiences, maintains "pills, medicines, and all those injections, are not enough. I take herbs too, and then think of the wonders of the universe as our people have always done." (*F*, 49)

The total reliance of this woman on the Western epistemological order so that she may relate to life in her community, makes her comparable to the parents of Vukani in the story "The Music of the violin," who side with the oppressors of their people and privilege Western values over the African ones. Vukani's mother goes even as far as appropriating the oppressors insulting language to her people by calling African children "Kaffir children" and "savages." There is no wonder that Ndebele, to use Mzamane's words, "describes the Black middle class as the darlings of the White liberals."<sup>13</sup>

Using Western values as the only frame of reference in educating their children, Vukani's parents do not allow him and his sister Teboho to freely interact with their relatives and other children in the township. Unlike Uncle Lovington, who spends time shaping his nephew's consciousness by educating him about the value of one's roots and family relationship in "Uncle," in this story Vukani's mother, nurse Dorcas, does not spare any effort to disconnect her children from their uncles, aunts and cousins. In response to her children's yearning for a restoration of their subjectivity through a reconnection with their roots, Dorcas maintains to their bewilderment that "relatives . . . can be a real nuisance. Once you have opened the door, they come trooping in like ants. We cannot afford it these days. Not with the cost of living. These are different times. Whites saw this problem a long time ago. That is why they have very little time for relatives." (*F*, 148) There is no wonder, therefore, that Teboho, an informed university student, abhors her mother's servile reliance on imported values and calls her "a white black woman, a slave of things." (*F*, 146)

Believing, like the oppressors, that there is nothing valuable in African tradition and music, Dorcas introduces Vukani to and locks him up in the confines of the music of Western composers such as Mozart, Brahms, Liszt and Dvorak. As a result, Vukani cannot even play the township's popular song "Thoko Ujola Nobani?" (*F*, 140) Within this

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<sup>13</sup> M. V. Mzamane. *Black Consciousness Poets in South Africa, 1967-1980: With Special Reference to Mongane Serote and Sipho Sepamla* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). University of Sheffield, 1982, 314.



context, Bhuka and his gang's assault on Vukani on his way home to Dube should be seen as an invitation to the latter to get out of his parent's imprisoning restrictions and fulfil his potential in society. They want him to function like Uncle in "Uncle" and strengthen their subtle resistance against oppression with his music. In other words, they are trying to free him from the unproductive terrorising discourse that his parents have adopted, and transform him into a useful subject in their community. That is the reason why Bhuka, the gang leader, says to the terrified Vukani: "We just wanted to talk to you nice-nice. That's all. We just wanted to dance to your music a little. Dance to your guitar a little. But no, you don't even look at us. Do we smell, music man? Do we smell?" (*F*, 138-39)

However, Vukani's and Teboho's final rebellion against the confining influence of their middle-class parents (a nursing sister and a school inspector) and the latter's realisation of their narrow vision of culture and life at the end of the story create a sense of hope in both the community and the reader's mind. Certainly the children's subjective march into their interiority from their parents' world of faulted connections will now inspire and lead the latter on a productive path. Against this background one can hardly agree with Mackenzie when he argues that "an important element of the stories is their autobiographical input in which middle-class values are conspicuous. The emphasis on education, on reading, on history, on music and a written culture places the trajectory of Ndebele's stories well out of the reach of the majority of people."<sup>14</sup>

Vukani and Teboho's resolve to break away from their parents' barren middle-class and elitist aspirations in order to realise their human potential within the possibilities offered by their community's cultural milieu is comparable to that of Thoba in "The Test." With a mind locked up in the Western order of discourse and values as well as the limited horizon offered by Bantu education, Teacher Mbele, like Vukani's parents in "The Music of the Violin," tries as hard as he can to do the same for his son through boring and unproductive tortuous tutorials in mathematics and the Bible. Becoming himself an agent of oppression, he says: "never! . . . Moulding these ones requires much energy and self-sacrifice . . . I will not ever say 'wait a minute' to duty." (*F*, 6) However, Thoba refuses to yield to his father's effort to isolate and cut him off from his friends and community — his roots. Indeed, he rejects his father's "evolué" status as he is seen constantly in flight in

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Mackenzie. "Njabulo Ndebele and the Language of Black Resistance." A Paper presented at Fort Hare Library Week, 14 May, 1990, 17.

search of reconnection with other underprivileged children in the township, without whom the struggle against all the oppressive forces in his community cannot succeed:

Thoba looked at Mpiyakhe's feet as Mpiyakhe slipped them into socks first, and noticed how smooth those feet were compared to Nana's which were deeply cracked. Then he looked at Vusi's and Simangele's feet. Theirs too were cracked. His were not. They were as smooth as Mpiyakhe's. Thoba remembered that he had three pairs of shoes, and his mother had always told him to count his blessings because most boys had only one pair, if any shoes at all, for both school and special occasions like going to church. Yet Thoba yearned to have cracked feet too. So whenever his mother and father were away from home, he would go out and play without shoes? (F, 5)

It is in the united company of the boys, such as Mpiyakhe, Simangele, Nana, Vusi and others that Thoba finds energy for his subjective impulses and decides along with them to challenge, defy and attempt to defeat all the forces of oppression in his community, represented by the rain, cold, disease, an irrelevant education system and his father's middle-class aspirations.

In this story Teacher Mbele's *evolué* character contrasts with that of Nana's grandmother, who "was always away looking for roots to heal people with." (F, 4) Like Ma Buthelezi in "Fools" and the prophetess in "The Prophetess," Nana's grandmother is a spiritual and physical healer in the community. Her association with children, therefore, brings a sense of hope in the reader. Ndebele uses the word root here as a pun which means both the roots of medicinal plants as well as the tradition and history of the people of Charterston. Her healing process thus involves a reshaping of her people's consciousness of their tradition and history, which apartheid laws and Bantu education have virtually destroyed. It also entails the awakening of an awareness in her people of the environmental potential of their setting. Indeed, what these women are trying to do in these stories is, to use Ndebele's words, "to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society,"<sup>15</sup> and to transform Africans into vibrant subjects that can determine their own future or their own march towards "the plane of consistency of multiplicities." As rightly argued by Mzamane: "Education for a national culture must be designed to restore Africans to their history and to liberate the African mind from vicious European stereotypes. A pedagogy of liberation education, such as

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<sup>15</sup> Ndebele, *Rediscovery*, 65.

we advocate, must be rooted in the cultural institutions of the people, their history and destination, and take cognisance of their unfolding culture of liberation."<sup>16</sup>

Drawing from the above discussion of Ndebele's fiction, one can see that his work is informed by a strong vision that the knowledge of "the self" that entails one's appreciation of and identification with one's people's achievements throughout their history, should be the starting point of a meaningful struggle. In fact, as has been demonstrated in this paper, if most of his seemingly revolutionary characters fail to transform themselves into subjects that can effectively chart a positive course of action for the liberation of their oppressed people, it is mainly because of their failure to reconcile themselves with their people's history, tradition and popular culture. However, Ndebele's view in this regard is not essentialist; rather he believes, like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, that "knowing oneself and one's environment is the correct basis of absorbing the world; that there could never be only one centre from which to view the world but that different people in the world have their culture and environment as the centre."<sup>17</sup> Ndebele has therefore skilfully shown through his art that, to use Ngara's words, "A nation without a history has no claim to equality with other nations."<sup>18</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> M. V. Mzamane. "Education for a National Culture of Reconstruction and Reconciliation in South Africa". *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. 86 (March 1994), 76.

<sup>17</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Moving the Centre: The Struggles for Cultural Freedoms* (London: James Currey, 1993), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Ngara. *Songs from the Temple* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1992), 3.

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