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WRITING AS TRANSFORMATIONAL:
A MARXIST FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MIRIAM TLALI'S WORKS

by

Mante Mphahlele

B.A. Honors, University of the North (South Africa), 1988

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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in the Department
of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis postulates a Marxist feminist perspective in the analysis of Miriam Tlali's fiction. Attention has been given to Tlali's disclosure of the adverse black experience in South Africa, and the various ways which Tlali proposes as the panacea to the situation. Central to her vocation is the pursuit of justice through the transformation of the oppressed people's position of marginality to that of centrality to power and discourse. Tlali's works are thus utilitarian in perspective because of her primary conviction in the oppressed people's accessibility to empowering resources. Her didacticism is validated by her grounding of her fictional content in real life experiences, and letting her fiction act as a mirror of the society.

The first two chapters deal with the dynamics of black existence in South Africa, and point to the factors defining its uniqueness. Conversations with Miriam Tlali in chapter three gives that existence a perspective which informs her fiction. The final chapter deals with the problems encountered by black people in academic institutions that do not recognize their culture and presence as a people. A theory is therefore constructed to suggest approaches to Tlali's work. A transcript of the author's interview with Tlali constitutes an appendix to this thesis.

DEDICATION

To Khotso,

For all those years,

with only a dream for a mother

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PREFACE

My approach to Tlali's works is descriptive and expository, rather than discursive and evaluative. I felt drawn to this approach, given Tlali's peculiar slant to socialist politics. Tlali is concerned about exposing the South African political system and the adverse ways in which it affects black people. As both a feminist and a womanist, Tlali perceives the political liberation of all black people in the country as dependent upon the removal of apartheid and its oppressive institutions. Her writing is therefore expository, and has as such influenced my approach in this thesis.

After a long consideration of other literary theories like Postmodernism, Deconstruction and Poststructuralism, I finally settled for Marxist feminism. The theory's attention to social issues like gender and class struggles and many other contentious issues seemed the most probable in analyzing Tlali's fiction. However, my application of this hybrid theory was aimed at the South African situation which is not exactly the same as the societies which the propounders of Marxism and feminism based their ideas. I borrowed this theory merely as a reflection of the concerns of the South African democratic movements in their struggle for political liberation. I therefore do not engage in any rigorous Marxist or feminist discourse, but do embrace the ideas as they seem fitting to Tlali's fiction.

Much as I do take into account such political amendments as the removal of the Group Areas Act and the Influx Control laws which were/are the mainstays of apartheid, I wish to emphasize the fact that the South African government still has a lot

of ground to cover in transforming the political status quo. For this reason, these changes remain cosmetic and superficial to me, and simply constitute a very minor departure from the core problems of racial discrimination and class oppression in South Africa. For as long as black people are denied the right to vote, and do not possess any claims to the land, we really cannot talk about any significant political changes in the country. Only the right to vote and ownership of land will feature as the major signals to political empowerment of black people. South Africa is at a very crucial point politically, and it needs the cooperation of all concerned to assist in its process of transformation and economic equity.

The continuing carnage in the country shadows a peaceful transition to political life in South Africa, and it has to be stopped by all means. This preface is written in the wake of renewed violence in the country due to the cold blooded murder of former Umkhonto we Sizwe (the Military Wing of the African National Congress) chief of staff, and Communist Leader in South Africa, Comrade Chris Hani. It is such unnecessary murders that greatly undermine the efforts of the inevitable process of the road to the new South Africa. *Amandla!*

Chapter 1

Writing for Political Transformation and Empowerment

Writing for political transformation and empowerment is a process that confirms the causal connection between oppressive socio-political conditions and revolutionary art and writing. It is a creative utilitarian activity which a socially conscious author undertakes with a view to incorporate and intensify the political consciousness of her reading audience, positively influencing their analyses of the contradictions inherent in their political dispensations within a system that propagates hostile social forms to them. As a fiction writer who is engaged in the culture of liberation and guided by Marxist feminist principles, Miriam Tlali participates in a revolutionary creative process of eradicating the presently oppressive and punitive political system in South Africa known as "apartheid," and replacing it with an alternative legitimate socialist system that will be democratically implemented. Apartheid operates by systematically entrenching racial segregation and exclusivity, simultaneously promoting cultural hegemony by the ruling race. The subjugated race is controlled by political non-representation, material deprivation, and its continued exposure to systematic violence and terror which is maintained through a series of vicious laws that wage psychological warfare against those who offer resistance. Tlali exercises her inalienable right to freedom of speech and choice of themes through her revolutionary fiction, radically condemning reactionary persecution meted out by opposing authorities and other mainstream critics. Her enforced inferior status as a black woman living in South Africa under the policy of apartheid has created the urgency for her to make a critical examination of her marginalized socio-political reality, analyze its content, and to act upon it by motivating her reading audience to participate in definitive actions that will empower them to transform their degrading conditions into respectable ones. To

achieve this, Tlali has to reaffirm her own identity by continually addressing the imposed varieties of social hierarchies of political voice, materialism, and gender biases within her society, vigorously challenging them and replacing them with genuine social equity and justice.

The reflective act of writing engages Tlali in self-empowering cathartic exercises which examine the causes and effects of her experiences due to her multiple oppressive situation, and simultaneously forces her to confront her internalized denigrating self-images by providing a conducive milieu for the adoption of empowering and objective strategies of altering those images. The process further leads her to a profound understanding of her past and present socio-political and economic reality, and confirms the fact that the policy of racial segregation in the country is a mere veil used to conceal the underlying socio-economic monopoly exploited by the South African government through its capitalist system. Bernard Magubane, a South African Marxist critic asserts that the apartheid policy has as its goal the "psychological discouragement and mental enslavement of the oppressed classes."¹ Indeed, claims for respect of cultural diversity among black people are at best a patronizing lie covering up racial and material oppression, sexism, and the potential for genocide. The adverse effects of systematic political and cultural intolerance of the majority black people by the minority white regime through the oppressive capitalist system inform the basis of Tlali's fiction. Her writing communicates the necessity to immobilize the capitalist system as it continues to oppress black people in South Africa. It also retains the evidence of black people's historical realities of oppression and subjugation on the one hand, and an objective consideration of their consistent socio-political concerns on the other hand.

To date, Tlali has published two novels, Muriel at Metropolitan (1975) (originally called Between Two Worlds), and Amandla (1980). In 1978, Tlali completed a play written in Sesotho called Khodumodume, but never published it. This was followed by another play, Crimen Injuria (1984), which she wrote and directed while on a tour in Holland. The play was rated a "Play of the Month" in Holland, and was produced in New York as well. Tlali has also written a documentary called Mihloti (1984), which comprises interviews, travelogues, some journalistic writing, and a short story. She also has to her credit a collection of short stories titled Soweto Stories (1989). This anthology is now published by David Philip in Cape Town under its original title of Footprints in the Quagmire, a Sesotho translation of Mehlala Khatamping. Two other interviews by Tlali appear in a collection of writings by South African writers, edited by Ann Oosthuizen.² All these publications espouse as their dominant theme the plight of the oppressed people in South Africa under a white tyrannical political system on the one hand, and Tlali's aim at transforming the oppressed people's marginalized position to one of political and economic power and influence on the other hand.

Of all Tlali's narratives thus far, Amandla expresses the collective historical and contemporary socio-political aspirations and frustrations of the oppressed people in South Africa. The title of the novel means "power" in Nguni (a linguistic group covering Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele), and it conveys the oppressed people's right and means to power by governing their own economic and socio-political affairs, rather than be subjected to the designs of an illegitimate government that has imposed its atrocious laws upon them. The oppressed people's determination to achieve their political rights is compelled by the designs of the policy of apartheid that have systematically excluded them from any form of meaningful participation in the running of the state, consequently rendering them invisible and perpetual minorities in their own native land. The cry of "amandla" voices their collective objection and resistance

to the relentless onslaught by their oppressors as they challenge the antagonistic apartheid laws. "Amandla" is a cry for political self-determination and restoration of the lost pride and dignity that were ravaged by the legacy of colonial imperialism, perpetuated today by the apartheid policy. It is also a cry that asserts the revolutionary spirit necessary to fight for survival against oppressor forces that threaten to fragment or break it. Furthermore, it is an encouraging cry for those whose vision of the future has been clouded by their experiences of pain and humility, and has been fed with fear and doubts about ever realizing their rights to power and freedom. The clenched fists that are raised in unison with the cry of "amandla" symbolize the political power that can only be achieved through ideological unity and collective action against the forces of oppression. The cover of the Ravan Press edition of the novel Amandla encapsulates the polarized ideologies between the two major forces in the politics of the country. The liberating potential of the clenched fist on the cover counters the symbolical oppressive prickly barbed-wire. The barbed wire stands for the government's indiscriminate suppression of any social commentaries and creative writings critical of its policies by classifying them as "Undesirable," "Listed," or "Banned." The "Now Unbanned!"³ notification at the bottom right hand corner of the cover signifies a victory on the part of the oppressed people in regaining their freedom of expression over senseless censorship. Like Muriel at Metropolitan and two short stories from the Soweto Stories collection, Amandla was banned from circulation immediately after its publication. Tlali derives the "amandla" title from its historical and contemporary political significance in South Africa, and she conveys a message of political solidarity and social responsibility to those who are actively involved in the struggle for the abolition of apartheid inside the country and abroad.

Amandla illustrates the liberating measures that the oppressed people are forced to adopt in order to communicate their collective concerns of achieving political

independence and social equality. It outlines the conditions that shape the political development of the characters as it relies on concrete historical evidence. Its realism is embedded in the author's passionate fusion of historical facts with contemporary events in a milieu that sustains their political and revolutionary relevance. The novel effectively raises the political consciousness of the readers in relation to the roots of the characters' social, political and economic subjugation that is still evident today. Tlali exploits her acute awareness of the history of her characters' social relations and the nature of their class society by voicing their concerns and devising means of transforming their presently oppressive life into one of political power and effective self-representation. The historical reality of apartheid and the consequent reactions of those who oppose it inform the historical and militant nature of this novel.

The relaxed mood of the cinematic setting of Amandla's first paragraph counterpoints the significance of the title of the novel itself, and camouflages the immanent succession of separate, but related turbulent events that constitute the whole novel. Tlali recounts the situation:

It was a bright autumn day - Monday the 29th of April, 1975. Pholoso, a nineteen-year-old matric student at the Ipopeng High School, Soweto was relaxing in a comfortable thickly-padded chair in the Starlite Cinema in Johannesburg's busy President Street. Seated next to him was Felleng, his childhood sweetheart. They were holding hands in the dark, their eyes fixed attentively on the screen. Someone poked his shoulder. When he turned anxiously to see who it was, a voice he recognised as Sipho's whispered:

'Po, het jy gehoor? Die "terrorists" is hier!

Pholoso was trying to grasp the meaning of those words when the voice continued:

'There are policemen and soldiers all over outside and many people have been shot!'

With a great effort, Pholoso dragged his mind out of its dazed state. He looked into the darkness and faced the set of gleaming white teeth from which the sound came. He asked:

'Ao! Si, is dit jy, my broer? Hoe meen jy, watse

terrorist?'

'Ja mfo, die "terrorists". Hulle's hier, man!'

Pholoso could feel his hair stand on end. He did not know what to say. He turned away from the voice and looked at the silhouette of the girl beside him and whispered, smiling:

'Felleng, did you hear that? They say the terrorists are here!'

For the last ten minutes or so there had been a continuous annoying movement of people in and out of the cinema. A distracting restlessness had seized the audience and the ushers wielding torches at the entrance a few metres away from them.

'Ao!' Felleng exclaimed, looking in the direction of the voice.

'Yes, Felleng,' the voice repeated, 'the terrorists are here. Right here, in Jo'burg!'
(Amandla, 1-2)⁴

The natural incipient decay of plants and other life forces in the autumn season during which the novel opens accelerates the continuing decline of the autocratic white rule in South Africa, and ushers in a period of renewed militant revolutionary activism by those opposed to apartheid. The calculated acts of sabotage and occupations of targeted buildings carried out by the so-called terrorists serve as an overture to liberation, and mark a new wave of strategies in facilitating victory in the struggle for political transformation and empowerment of the oppressed people without any deliberate loss of life. Such strategies were adopted because of relentless violence by the government which was, and still is, aimed even against innocent civilians and unarmed people participating in peaceful protest marches or other passive resistance activities. The whole novel pulsates with the discordant rhythm of the mayhem that signifies the physical and ideological battle ground between the oppressor and the oppressed. The shouts of "amandla" that ring from Soweto are echoed throughout the black townships and the rural areas, thus bringing the whole country to a state of political siege. Even the idealized and fictional world of Starlite cinema which is about to show "The Ten Commandments" is rudely disrupted by the penetrating impulse of the compelling bloody reality outside.

For Pholoso, the novel's main character, and his childhood sweetheart, Felleng, the momentary escape provided by the big screen remains a distant fantasy to them, for no sooner have they taken their seats inside the cinema hall, than they are jolted back to reality by the events outside the cinema walls. When Siphon, one of Pholoso's friends, informs him of the outside commotion which is created by the politically motivated attacks at Carlton Center, Pholoso receives the news with shock. Siphon's story sounds absurd, he thinks, because how could black people manage to launch such an attack when the South African government always boasts about its invincible Defence Force? What has happened to their mighty white navy and their powerful white force that dutifully patrols the borders of the neighboring countries? he ponders. All Pholoso needs to do is to go outside to see for himself, and indeed, the heavy presence of the police and the army just outside the cinema confirms the reality of Siphon's story, and all its political implications. But before he leaves the cinema, the appearance of the face of Cecil B. de Mille on the screen, speaking of the birth of a Savior-Moses, makes him ponder the significance of his name. His name, which coincidentally means "salvation" in Sesotho, weighs heavily on his mind because it somehow suggests his crucial role in life, which he assumes to be political activism given the present situation. The bombing at Carlton Center simply acts as a catalyst for his active participation in the struggle for political liberation for his people. When he glances at some of the newspaper headlines which read: **"GUNMEN MOW DOWN 32 IN CITY HORROR"** and **"GUN BLITZ IN CITY: 32 HURT, 4 HOSTAGE,"** he realizes that they not only convey the panic and fear and confusion that imprint themselves on the people's minds and faces as he and Felleng leave the cinema, but also confirm his predetermined involvement in political issues. The terrorists' occupation of the Carlton Center buildings after the bombing heightens the uncertainty of the situation,

simultaneously sealing Pholoso's fate with the progressive political struggle in South Africa.

Tlali's narrative communicates an atmosphere of urgency and apprehension as Pholoso and Felleng join the rush back to Soweto. In Soweto, as in other townships around the country, the news of the Carlton Center bombing inspires dialogues about the course of action to be followed in addressing the country's questionable political history and its present state. Pholoso and his friends engage in heated debates on the issue, and examine their position in lieu of their denied political rights and economic opportunities in their native land. They also compare their colonized history with conditions in other parts of the world, regretfully acknowledging their vulnerability to possible genocide should war break out. The grim reality of the consequences of their inaccessibility to weapons and other artillery drives them to depression and pessimistic views of their future. The regrettable massacre of innocent black people at the scene of the Carlton Center shooting fills most of them with trepidation, for it increasingly spells their uncertain future. While they bemoan their fate, other people in the township vent their frustration by destroying government administration buildings and vehicles, power stations, police stations, post offices and liquor stores, for they all symbolize their oppression. They resort to such violent actions not only as means to appease their pains, but also as counter measures to the violence propagated by the government itself in its enforcement of its repressive laws. As the administrative board offices are razed to the ground, people recount the pains they suffered in the hands of the white officials who worked there:

'He was sitting against that window and he kept on sniffing through his nostrils and opening it as if something was smelling.'

'Who? When?'

'Botma. The superintended!' answered Betty, snapping back at Nana impatiently as if she *should* have known who she was talking about.

She went on:

'It was the day my dear brother experienced the humiliation of being considered an outcast in the land of his birth.'

'When? You mean Buti?'

'Yes. The day he drove Buti to the hostel and chased his wife out of Johannesburg. The morning after the Board's blackjacks had raided our house at three o'clock in the morning.' (18)

Betty's recollection of how her brother, Buti, and his wife were humiliated by another one of the pillars of the atrocious apartheid laws known as influx control, informs us of the inner jubilation and a momentary sense of relief and control by the people as they watch all the buildings in which all these and other restricting laws were enforced go down in flames. Buti and his wife represent the multitudes of black families all over the country who have to answer to the despotic authorities at odd hours of the night for their "illegal" presence in designated "white" areas, unpleasant experiences which are often accompanied by indefinite prison detentions and possible evictions from the urban areas to dry, unproductive and faraway rural areas, or what are called Native Reserves or homelands, created specifically for African occupancy after conquest.⁵ Steadily, these reserves become undisputed reservoirs of cheap labor, while the industrial areas are reserved for exclusive white residence and industrial development. Ngubane says of the reserve system that it is meant to "effectively arrest the African's development, while at the same time allowing for whites to draw on Africans for exploitation in urban industries."⁶ Botma, the superintendent at the Moroka administration board's offices is one of the tools used to enforce the laws without any remorse, and exercising his control over people on the day of his encounter with Buti, said to him:

**"Dit is die wet, nie ek nie. As die wet se jou
'mosadi' mag nie hier wees nie, dan moes sy net uit!"**

(18-19)

(This is the law, not me. When the law says your wife shouldn't be here, then she must be out!)

In the same vein of white superiority and haughtiness, protected by the apartheid policy which gives the white people the right to harass black people, Botma turns to one of the "blackjacks"⁷ and says: **"You. Take this woman to go and collect her belongings from her sister-in-law's place, now!"** Looking at Buti's wife with the same contempt with which he treats her and her husband, he says to the blackjack: **"Se haar. Ons moet haar nie meer in daardie huis kry nie!"** (Tell her. We shouldn't find her in that house again). Pointing to Buti, he says **"As ons haar weer daar kry, sal jy in die groot moelikheid wees. Hoor jy?"** (If we find her there again, then you will be in big trouble. Do you hear?). Having dealt with them in that brash and uncouth manner, Botma dismisses them, and without any feeling, shouts out to the next person in the queue: **"Kom, kom nou! Ek het nie tyd om te mors nie. Volgende!"** (Come, come now! I don't have time to waste. Next!). And so he goes on, filled with hatred and utter ignorance, adversely altering people's lives without any due consideration of the implications of his acts.

To the adults standing by, memories of such painful and bitter incidents refuse to be diffused by the smoke from the burning administration buildings, for they are buried deeply in their collective consciousness, and can only be placated by a truly democratic power. To the younger generations, most of whom do not even understand the historical factors that have led to their present social predicament, each crumbling building is greeted with the resounding shouts of "Power!" and "Amandla!" for their fall signifies the cracks in the ultimate collapse of the apartheid regime, and an end to all their oppression. Apartheid has already tempered (pun intended) with their lives, and has negatively affected their political and socio-economic future in an irrevocable way. When they analyze their parents' lives, the youth can surmise the damage apartheid has done to them and their society. For those who have been spared the humiliating experience of being evicted from their homes due to rent arrears, or having

their parents or other relatives arrested under any of the apartheid laws, they finally come face to face with the system when they register for school for the first time. The school system requires their parents to present them at the very same administration board's buildings before they can be admitted at school, thus exposing them to the horrors of the apartheid system quite early in their lives. It is at these buildings that parents are asked denigrating questions pertaining to their marital status, the whereabouts of other members of the family, the family's income level, the number of children in the household--irrelevant questions, all designed to insult the parents in the presence of their children. Despite the difference in the ages of the people gathered here watching the burning administration buildings, the intensity of their anger is the same, and their experiences arguably the same. The commonality of the oppressed people's experiences in the novel helps to bring them together in an acute sense of solidarity with each other, and each other's problems.

One of the strengths of Amandla is that it does not address the people's political reality in exclusive terms, but instead illustrates the integral role of political violence in defining their unfavorable social conditions. Tlali examines other shades of violence in the society so as to present a conclusive account of the adverse effects of the policy of apartheid. The episodes of Agnes' abuse by her husband, Joe, and of Nicodemus' clandestine love affair with Teresa, in an otherwise political novel, indicate the implausibility of excluding the influence of politics from any social setting. Tlali's intention in including these love scenes is to illustrate that all the characters' actions interpret their political system, which, in turn, constructs their social reality. Nicodemus' affair with Teresa is a defensive assertion of his self-defined identity in an environment that is hostile to him as a black person and a policeman at that. Like the blackjacks, Nicodemus and other policemen are treated with contempt by the people because of their career, and they, in turn, react by violating some social practices like

marital fidelity. As for Joe, his lack of respect for his wife and children is a direct consequence of a lack of respect from the apartheid policy, coupled with the systematic denial of his right to defend and maintain his integrity. Apartheid has made him hate himself, and he now hates other people, even his wife and children as a consequence. He projects his problems on them, and because of their proximity to him (both in blood and physical distance), he unleashes his anger and frustration on them. Tlali illustrates how these interrelated psycho-social and political maladies find recourse only in the perpetuation of violence, rather than in any life affirming behavior.

Other instances of violence propagated by the apartheid policy include the consequences of the government's practice of forced removals of black people. The location of the cemetery where Gramsy Moeng's husband's tombstone is unveiled is a case in point. The site of the cemetery, as compared to the residential area of the relatives of the people buried there, informs the reader of the historical facts and social implications surrounding the country's political laws of racial segregation, some of which are executed through forced removals. Braamfontein, initially a black area, has since been declared a white area, and relatives have to travel from Soweto and other surrounding black areas to unveil the tombstones of their relatives who were buried there before the introduction of the segregation laws. The decision to proclaim Braamfontein a "white area" was not an amicable one, but a show of brutal force encouraged by the government's total disregard for black people in South Africa. Tlali alludes to the same boorish attitude displayed by the government in Muriel at Metropolitan, whereby the old black township of Sophiatown has been allocated to white people. The town is now curiously known as Triomf, the Dutch word for "triumph." Again, the forced removals of black people from Sophiatown were not motivated by any positive considerations for black people, but were simply acts of violence and insolence on the part of the government.

Although the theme of violence disrupts the novel's coherence, it nonetheless facilitates Tlali's realist intention in her portrayal of the complex black South African urban life. She brings out the characters' attempts at maintaining normal lives as portrayed in their going to work and watching movies, amidst the perpetual confusion created by the political upheaval in the country. Even the timing for company at 'T' Moremi's house in chapter 4 is no exception to every day life, for it blends in quite naturally with the social demands of the time. The theme of politics even at this time of the night illustrates the content of current debates, thus confirming the centrality of politically related issues and activities in the lives of South Africans.

Despite its lack of a tight plot, Amandla still maintains a coherence of ideas which are communicated by the pervasiveness of physical and emotional violence fostered by indecent political and social conditions. The novel derives its episodic disjointedness also from Tlali's deliberate contextual merging of separate incidents for the purpose of illustrating their underlying thematic homogeneity. The first two chapters deal with separate but related events, for chapter 1 focuses on the Carlton Center bombings of April 1975, whereas chapter 2 centers around the June 1976 Soweto uprisings, when students protested against the institutionalization of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in their schools. Each of these events occupies its own time and space, yet both of them are brought together by their unilateral base of a continued struggle for political transformation and empowerment of the black people in South Africa. Even though the 1975 jubilation swiftly gives way to the grim reality of the situation as Pholoso staggers back wounded and grieving over the death of a comrade friend by the name of Dumisani in 1976, the novel still retains its coherence as Jane Watts observes.⁸ Tlali creates a dialogic continuity between the two incidents without an orchestration of dissonant discourses or any major disruptions to plot by connecting the

two incidents in succeeding chapters, for indeed, the 1976 uprisings were a natural consequence of the unheeded messages sent by the 1975 Carlton Center events. Correspondingly, she vacillates in time and event, as evident in chapter 15, where two teachers discuss problems fostered by the education system and the homeland policy at the beginning of 1977, whereas chapter 19 takes us back to August '76 and Pholoso's escape from a police van. In chapter 20 we encounter Pholoso hiding from the police in early January '77, while chapters 20 and 21 occur in December '76 before Christmas, and chapter 23 on December 31 of the same year.⁹ However, the loose and fragmented rendition of episodes in the novel fails to undermine the novel's singularity of theme and purpose. The insistence on a structural unity of the novel would be fallacious, since the existence and the experiences of the characters cannot be structured as an author can hope to structure her/his novel. In his essay "Us and Them," Chabani Manganyi argues that an individual is always transacting with her/his environment, that s/he is always in dialogue with it, and that the results of that dialogue shape, and are shaped by her/his experiences.¹⁰ Pholoso portrays a discordant relationship with his environment, and his experiences shatter the linear development of time and events.

None of the incidents are linear in perspective, for they demonstrate the common valences active in all others, inherently disregarding the conventional European interpretation of chronology and the Aristotelian conception of the unities of time, space and action. Tlali constructs new unities by creating the theaters of operation beyond the nature and duration of the struggle itself, yet subordinates all the activities to a central end. She subverts the demands of chronology to the demands of the narrative, effortlessly interweaving Pholoso's life with the rhythm and fabric of the society. As Watts observes, Amandla avails life to convincingly take over from literature, and assert itself by dictating themes, literary conventions and questions of style and form in an interesting interplay of flashbacks and flashforwards.¹¹ Through

her authorial consciousness, Tlali lets reality construct textual form, rather than subjecting her narrative to literary conventions. She therefore affirms the primacy of context over text, and seeks to illustrate how consciousness, like textual form itself, is also shaped by the social environment. The primacy of context over text defines her experience-based discourse.

Given the pervasive disruption of a logical succession of events due to the instability caused by violence in the novel, it is hardly surprising that death, whatever its cause, should be the only consistent and sobering event. Death also serves as a unifying factor for people who are continually disintegrating because of their socio-political reality. Because of the banning of public meetings, funerals and similar gatherings provide a forum for the characters to express their collective visions and ideological beliefs in a peaceful and egalitarian society. Tlali incorporates the African philosophical spatial and temporal components of "Hantu" to endorse the serenity provided by death, and also to confirm the continuity of life after death, which is expressed in the inseparability of time and space.¹² In the African sensibility, death does not signify any spiritual disconnectedness between the living and the departed, for it is not viewed as a destroyer of life. Instead, it reaffirms its continuous link with life, thus defining it as its necessary passage. Death is as such revered because of its assurance of a more meaningful form of existence than the current one offered by life. In paying his last respects to Dumisani, a popular student leader says:

... We Africans respect and revere our dead. They are our saints and mediators. We believe that after death they are more active than when they are alive. We keep them "alive" by naming our children after them so that the living link with them is not severed. We remember them from time to time in many of our family ceremonies ...

(76)

When Pholoso's turn to speak comes, he says:

Rest in peace, my dear brother. We vow on this day that we shall never tire, that we shall relentlessly pursue this course for freedom, until those aspirations and ideals for which you gave your life are realised. Son of the soil, your precious blood which was shed by the enemy shall sink into the earth and there nurture the roots of the tree of liberation ... (80)

Even though the words are uttered with great austerity, they nonetheless convey a sense of victory to the departed. The dead are perceived to have achieved a higher form of life, absolved of all human complexities and miseries, and they are thus worthy of respect. The mourners transform the negative cause of the violence that led to the death of the political unrest victim into a positive force of survival. They draw inspiration for more vitality and commitment in their daily struggle for human rights from the dead, respectfully invoking their eternal presence and guardianship. The ritual of burying their dead signifies the existing link between them which is maintained through a spiritual dialogic continuity.

Tlali illustrates a similar dialogic continuity by examining some of the psychological repercussions suffered by people of non-European descent under the apartheid clause of the Group Areas Act. In the short story "Metamorphosis" from the collection Soweto Stories, she illustrates the extent of the humiliations experienced by victims of family and community disruptions due to the government's bizarre systematic classification of a person's race based on skin color and other physical features. The social and material benefits enjoyed by white people entice some people from the subjugated groups to forge new identities by taking on European names and consequently separating from their blood relatives. Such actions do not go without their share of latent psychological problems for those affected, because such people are compelled to deny themselves their true identities for the demeaning sake of enjoying the fleeting material benefits generously offered to people of the preferred race. They are forever forced to live with

the dilemma of either upholding their false identities, or renouncing them and going back to their own people.

Boetie McCabel, born Mbuti Mkhabela, personifies this dilemma, for much as he agonizes over the lie he is living, he still prefers to enjoy its frail benefits. He has moved from Soweto to Eldorado Park, a government declared colored area, and thus a "better" place to live than Soweto and other black townships. Significantly, he has established a panel-beating business as if to confirm the rewards of moving to Eldorado Park. None of his acquaintances in the area knows about his Soweto connections. Only his wife does, and she has also vowed to keep the "secret," thus maintaining the lie. The story exposes the multi-layered identity crisis that requires a complete personal metamorphosis if a person is to achieve inner peace. On one level, the story points to the tension that Boetie always experiences, for even when his own nephew, Velani Mkhabela visits him, he is not to reveal his true relationship with him. However, when they are together, Boetie always boasts to his nephew of the virtues of living in Eldorado Park, and yet his sense of pride and personal worth is indiscriminately violated, for he cannot keep the pretense indefinitely. As for his wife, she is forever subjected to the humility of having to cover for her husband, thus denying herself the pleasure of communicating with a complete person. Boetie cannot be a complete person because his identity is split between being an African and being a colored. Either by resuming his original African identity, or denying it completely in favor of his new found colored identity, will he restore his complete self.

On another level, the story deals with the emergence of youths who terrorize innocent people in the townships, robbing them of their cars, and sometimes of their lives as well. Such actions by the youths were never heard of before, but were largely the aftermath of the '76 uprisings. The youths seem to have found a way of asserting

their identities through committing crimes against their own people, showing no sense of positive direction or respect for their elders. Tlali perceives the motivations of the youths as being driven by a lack of purpose as they are deluded by the false sense of power derived from inflicting pain on other people. Their violent behavior towards other people reflects their internalized experiences of violence due to a system that categorically defines them as thugs, murderers, dope-addicts and hooligans even before they are born. Having no jobs to keep, or no schools to go to as their schools are turned into shooting grounds by the police and soldiers, the youths take to the streets, where they are assured of some sense of identity, albeit a sick one. They can only pride themselves in violent prowess that unavoidably brings misery to other people. Their actions are, however, not unexpected, because they simply reflect the grievous social circumstances of their childhood.

On yet another level, the story deals with the political transformation of Velani, who has always been relatively passive where political events are concerned. Even when he loses his car and risks his life as well, he still fails to see the correlation between what happens to him and the wider political spectrum. When life in Soweto proves to be increasingly unbearable, he seriously considers taking his uncle Boetie's advice of moving to Eldorado Park. He is the very uncle who refuses to acknowledge him as his nephew in the presence of other people, and only treats him as one of his customers in his panel-beating business. Velani's life reaches a complete turning-point when his uncle now discourages him from entertaining any ideas of moving to Eldorado Park. He actually advises Velani to stay in Soweto, because Eldorado is now like Soweto, and:

The "disease" has spread all over. We also have "comrades" here. They want solidarity with the people of Soweto. They say they are returning to their roots. They have wiped off the numbers from the houses. They say unless we are one the

struggle against the settlers is forever lost.
(Soweto Stories, 92)

As if that was not enough, Boetie adds: **"We all have to change."** Finding it hard to believe that it is his own uncle at the other end of the line discouraging him from moving to Eldorado Park, without another word, he:

... dropped the receiver and sank on to the sofa next to him. He sighed and whispered to himself, "It's no use. Real protection will come from the people themselves. From now on, I'm with the people".
(92)

Boetie's own metamorphosis is remarkable, even though he refers to the popularity of the struggle as "the disease". His change of heart affects Velani in such a way that no other experience has ever done. Both Boetie and Velani demonstrate some growth in personality and in their comprehension of the political situation that teaches them that they cannot escape from the system as it is, but that they should learn to confront it and deal with it. For Velani in particular, his passivity in addressing political issues has been challenged, and from now on, he is with the people, actively participating in their political projects. Only the youths remain trapped by their violent activities, and cannot possibly alter their lives for the better until they know and understand the factors that contributed to their problematic status quo, and learn more constructive ways of dealing with their anger and frustration.

In "Metamorphosis" Tlali illustrates the primacy of an individual's complete personal transformation in the achievement of collective political empowerment. Velani's and his uncle Boetie's metamorphoses are echoed in the collective convictions operative in Amandla, and they all point to the growing momentum of political consciousness among the people. Each one of them undergoes a cathartic process that

exposes them to personal experiences that are potentially transforming, albeit their violent and humiliating aspects. For the reader, the experiences of the characters are redeeming, for they provide an outlet for their own frustrations in a politically oppressive society. Tlali facilitates this process by her portrayal of characters that are believable, for they are drawn out of a concrete milieu that continues to exist today. The fact that there is no conclusive evidence to the effect that Boetie eventually leaves Eldorado Park and moves back to Soweto despite his understanding of the situation does not weaken his credibility. Instead, his continued residence in Eldorado will serve to conscientize his community about the direction of the political situation in the country. Pholoso's character, on the other hand, is one of the most easily identifiable in all of Tlali's fiction and the most believable, for it reminds us of the thousands of youths who joined the political struggle in the early seventies. Given the political climate of the time, Pholoso's decision to "skip" the country was shared by a multitude of youths who chose exile rather than be hounded by the state and its security police. His journey into the unknown illustrates his political convictions that are sustained by the certainty of victory in the end. In his parting words to Felling Pholoso says:

Let us not lose faith, Felling. We are still young and the future belongs to us; it is in our hands. Let us continue to look ahead and work hard. It is only when we work hard towards the attainment of our ideals that there can be hope for Azania. We can never fail, we shall win because history is on our side.

(Amandla, 293)

Pholoso's belief in the future can only be maintained by his determination to work hard for the political empowerment of his people. Once more, Tlali fuses history with the contemporaneity of events, for Pholoso is propelled by his knowledge of historical evidence in his venturing into the future. He becomes the "problematic hero," to use the concept that Lucien Goldmann borrows from Georg Lukacs. Pholoso sets out to search for authentic values in a degraded society.¹³ Goldmann goes on to say that the

problematic hero forms one half of the duality of the ontological and metaphysical existence, because he depends on history and all the modalities of time to inform his beliefs. Likewise, Pholoso is convinced that his authentic values of justice and egalitarianism are the required antidotes for his degraded society.

The end of the novel marks a parting of ways between Pholoso and Felleng, and the dawn of a new era in their love life on the one hand, and their political struggle on the other hand. Even at such a difficult time in her life, Felleng is portrayed as perceptive of her situation. Despite her shadowed ^{existence}, Felleng understands the existential reality that propels Pholoso to take such decisions, because she is equally committed to her political beliefs in a just and democratic society. She is therefore not being acted upon, as in fulfilling the cultural obligations of a woman expected to stay behind when her man goes to fend for his family. Rather, she displays an innate stoicism of a politicized and informed woman, whose understanding of the debilitating effects of the patriarchal system which oppresses her and her lover, allows her to empower him, by encouraging him to go and fight, instead of whimpering in self-pity. Although Tlali does not develop Felleng's character independently, she is nonetheless no mere adjunct to Pholoso. Rather, she sees the struggle not as separatist, but as an opportunity to forge links with men whose mutilated identity and sense of self has been created by the apartheid system. This integrated image of female and male gives the novel an optimistic ending, because it suggests that both sexes can cooperate in their political struggle, rather than create gender barriers between them. Felleng gives up Pholoso in a spirit of sacrifice to a greater cause. She watches him as:

He started running, without looking back. He seemed to be heading for the starry void ahead. She looked at the receding figure until it was a mere dot against the horizon, where the twilight of a new day was already becoming visible, and she turned to go.
(294)

The end of Amandla is an affirmation of the continuation of the liberation struggle in which Pholoso and other comrades are involved. It points to another stage of their struggle in which exile becomes a necessary option. Exile is therefore viewed not as a loss of one's familiar space, but as a creation of new platforms upon which the ideals of democracy should be experienced. It is also important because the alternative would be to live like a hermit, or worse still, to rot in jail, ultimately curbing the progress of the struggle. Also, the risks of assassination by the security police inside the country cannot be ignored, as some comrades have already been eliminated that way. The option of exile demonstrates the real consciousness of Pholoso and other comrades, for their potential consciousness under the circumstances would make a haphazard and unrealistic claim towards effecting an easy resolution, thus falsifying the novel's thematic and contextual complexities.

Notes

¹ Bernard Magubane, South Africa: From Soweto to Uitenhage (Trenton: Africa World, 1989) 5.

² Ann Oosthuizen, ed. Sometimes When It Rains: Writings by South African Women (London: Pandora, 1987) 164-78.

³ This notification appears only in the 1985 Ravan Press edition, the second edition after the first was banned in 1980.

⁴ All quotations will be from the 1980 Ravan Press edition.

⁵ The influx control laws ensure the systematic break down of black families by sentencing black men in the urban areas to single sex hostels or one room tin shacks in the townships just outside every major city, and confining their wives and children to the reserves, irrespective of whether the victims are familiar with those places or not. These enforced separations entrench the migratory labor system, for the men would have to commute to those reserves to visit their families. Because of their meagre salaries, and also depending on the distance between their homes and their work-places, the men are often able to visit their families only once a year, usually at Christmas time, and are thus deprived of performing their fatherly responsibilities.

⁶ Bernard Ngubane, The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979) 69.

⁷ The blackjacks are the black administration board's policemen, so called because of their black uniforms which usually depict them as comic figures with an air of obscenity. They also derive their name from a shrub that produces dry prickly weeds with yellow ends that tend to cling to woolen stuff especially, making it very difficult to shake them off. Worst of all, these weeds are irritating to the skin, and usually leave their marks on the flesh. Interestingly, these shrubs used to be grown as hedges in the townships, and their appropriateness to create boundaries ironically emphasizes the blackjacks' name. The blackjacks' enthusiastic arrest of black people for a variety of senseless laws, especially those that have to do with influx control, have earned them their name. In township lingo, the name "Jack" suggests a despicable person, the butt of everybody's jokes, and one who deserves no respect.

⁸ Jane Watts, Black Writers from South Africa (London: Macmillan, 1989) 223.

⁹ Ibid., 224.

¹⁰ Chabani Manganyi, Being-Black-in-the-World (Braamfontein: SPRO-CAS/Ravan, 1973) 28.

¹¹ Watts, 220.

¹² Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture (New York: Grove, 1961) 190.

¹³ Lucien Goldmann, Towards the Sociology of the Novel (London: Tavistock, 1975) 27.

Chapter 2

Being-a-Black-Woman-in-South Africa

The life of a black woman in South Africa is one fraught with massive frustrations because of the adverse political and socio-economic dispensations currently affecting it. It is also a life of resistance and political activism fostered by the black woman's vigilant spirit of striving towards political and sexual liberation, and her realization of the empowering nature of economic self-reliance. The South African political system has marginalized black women from the public center of political and economic power and discourse, and has relegated them to shadowy positions of obscurity and subordination, where they are defined as perpetual minors. In turn, black women have forged powerful mechanisms of political activism as evinced in their women-centred creative writing which expresses their multiple oppressive experiences, in their resolution to fight against their political and sexual oppression, and also in their determination to define themselves and their existence, as opposed to being defined, and to maintain their self-defined rights, identities, and independence, to name but a few instances. This dialectical relation of oppression and resistance defines the socio-political context within which Miriam Tlali produces her fiction. Her exploration and documentation of the lives of black women in South Africa is a demonstration of her commitment to extend their horizons, and to bring them to the attention of the wider public, actively engaging them in public discourse. Her fiction provides ammunition to black women's activism, and illustrates the cogency of their collective voice in procuring an effective counteraction to their political oppression.

Tlali's subjugated position, which is defined by her blackness, her womanness, and her unprivileged social class in a society that is hostile to all those social relations, impels her to name her semi-autobiographical work Mihloti. Mihloti is a Tsonga/Shangaan word for "tears," and it conveys Tlali's thoughts and emotions as she reflects upon the lives of black women in South Africa. Although the book is a tearful wordscape that textualizes the daily hardships experienced by black South African women in particular, it is far from being a lamentation sung out of self-pity. Instead, it is a passionate revival of the revolutionary spirit necessary to sustain the black women's struggle in their transformation of their political position in South Africa. The book is a lucid illustration of the profundity of the assertive and determined self and black womanhood in impressively overcoming the historically oppressive male-conceived obstructions that stand between the realization of the women's political, material, and gender power. Tlali's grandmother's words: **"To say woman is to say pot; to say woman is to say broom"** inform us of Tlali's intention of acknowledging the oppressive reality of her grandmother's worldview, and her (Tlali's) determination to subvert that situation, and transform it into a position of female independence from the cultural oppression of pots and brooms. Mihloti expresses Tlali's intentions in feminist mediated discourse which aims at undermining all the patriarchal ideas that designate a woman's mode of operation as domestic.

Tlali uses the preface to Mihloti to render a concise commentary on the social implications of her political status in South Africa. She effortlessly exposes the socio-political issues that shape the daily lives of black women, the lives that are forever relegated to the fringes of mainstream society, systematically silenced, and never meant to reach print. The first person narrative of the preface succeeds in engaging our company on Tlali's journey to telling her-story, thereby arousing our political consciousness, and appealing to our senses of immediacy in viewing her situation. The

preface is an intriguing exposition of a black South African everywoman, and it spans her life from childhood up to adulthood, discreetly making inroads into our understanding of her social position in relation to the larger political, cultural, and economic framework. Charting the contours of her South African black female third class existential landscape, and engaging in an internally persuasive discourse, Tlali says of herself:

Very often, I have *had* to shed tears. As a child, I had to shed them for my grandmother who had to till the soil with me on her back; to scrape the earth with her bare hands and build a mud-house in which to cook for us. For my father who died when I was an infant. I shed tears too when later my mother informed me that when I was born my father was disappointed because he wanted a son.

I shed tears for my beautiful mother who had to struggle alone. For the loneliness of my elder sisters and I, as we scanned the horizon hoping that 'Me would appear ... a lone bread-winner carrying parcels containing provisions (especially *lipompong* - bon-bons).

Now that I am a mother, I shed tears for my children when I realise that I would never be able to live with them and know fully the joys of motherhood. I often shed tears for their destiny, and the fact I can do so little to protect them and provide for them. I have often shed tears for the fate of all black children. For those we love so much who have left our land and cannot return. For our denigrated humanity which we must retrieve.

**Mihloti...teardrops...Masolinyana (my name) ...
The tears burn my eyes and drip down on to the paper before me.**

I have to shed them.

(xv)

The preface reveals Tlali's acute understanding of all the socio-political layers that constitute her multiple subjectivities which define her marginalization. As young children, most black women and men have watched the sun rise and set while strapped to the backs of the elderly womenfolk who were tilling the land to make a living. To

scrape the earth with one's hands is no mean feat, and to build a mud-house in which to cook what the earth has provided is a demonstration of tenacity borne out of unenviable living conditions under which, almost inevitably, a black woman finds herself. Black women are systematically forced to engage in such odious activities as part of their daily household duties because of the lack of any decent means of survival. Such instances of poverty cannot be pardoned especially in a country as materially rich as South Africa. Black women's low standards of living are maintained to support capitalism, and to perpetuate racial imbalance which, in turn, is further exploited to legitimate white imperialism and colonialism. Their menfolk are usually forced to seek work in the mines, far away from their homes and families, where they produce immense wealth for a country which despises them as a people. Tlali's concern for these social evils is echoed also in Amandla, in which the enforcement of the influx control laws results in a systematic disintegration of black families. Left on their own, the women devise strategies for survival. They become the sole providers for their households, and to a great extent, the shapers of culture. Tlali sheds tears again when she learns of her father's disappointment at her birth because of her gender. He wanted a son! The humility of living with the knowledge of one's father's disillusionment because of one's sex confirms the gravity of the unenviable status in the society. To a great extent, it instills in the mind of the girl the idea that she is second best, and that her contribution in the society can only be considered when male opinion has failed to produce the desired results. Tlali's fiction documents variations of the same hostilities that have unabatedly continued to complicate the lives of black women.

The first entry in Mihloti, "Detour into Detention," reveals the multiple layers of oppression that black women suffer. The punitive racist government makes them easy prey of the wrath of black policemen, who, driven by hate and ignorance, exercise the destructive power given to them by their white superiors. Tlali relates her experiences,

and those of other women and teenage girls of being detained in a cell at the Meadowlands Police-Station because of their defiance of the government's restriction on a mass burial of the slain Black Consciousness Movement's activist and leader, Steve Biko, in King William's Town. Biko's death at the hands of the South African government's security police created an uproar in the progressive sectors in the country, and prompted many people from all over the country to attend his funeral, and give him a hero's burial. The South African government issued a banning order for the planned mass funeral, and carried out its threats of violence by country-wide fatal shootings and massive detentions of the defiant mourners as they demonstrated their solidarity with Biko and his political beliefs, and went on with their plans to give him a mass burial. Tlali's account of her encounter with the police on this day centres around when she and other women in her group are already apprehended and held hostage at the Meadowlands Police Station. One woman tells of how a black policeman tried to attract her attention by showing her his pay cheque, pathetically oblivious of its meagerness, and obviously proud of his deplorable career:

Did you perhaps have the time to see what was happening where I was? That soldier or policeman who was sitting next to me pulled me down and made me sit near him. He kept asking me many questions. 'What's your name? Where do you live? Don't you want to pay me a visit at the Protea Barracks?' I said 'yes' to everything. I gave him a wrong address and all false names. I was frightened lest he attack me. I made a hundred-and-one promises. I said I was merely accompanying friends to King William's Town and he smiled saying I am a sensible girl. He even pulled out of his jacket his pay cheque and showed it to me. He said, 'Look, How much is this?' I looked and said seventeen rand, ignoring purposely the first number. He shouted, disgusted: 'Can't you see it's R217? I'll slap you! How can I earn so little money?' They're so stupid.

Another woman adds:

Yes. They must be from the bundus, from the mountains. That other one kept asking, 'Why are

**you tramping on my Florsheim shoes? Do you know
how much Florsheims cost? Will you buy them?'**
Fancy boasting about shoes in a police van.

(27)

These women's episodes reveal the black policemen's pride in their career which alienates them from their own people. The false power given to them by their white sergeants serves to make them all the more arrogant, thus preventing them from analyzing their attitude towards their own people, and start participating in the revolutionary struggle. They fail to make the distinction between genuine political power achieved through democratic means realized in full parliamentary representation, and the kind of sick power that they enjoy, the power that makes them willing oppressors of their own people. They would rather be reactionary, religiously following their white sergeants' orders to shoot and mutilate other black people. They also reveal a high level of corruption because they think that women will fall for them because of the amount of money they make. There is very little realization that they are paid dirty money, offered by a government that revels in oppression and murder. In spite of their meager salaries, the policemen are paid far more than teachers, nurses and other civil servants. However, the government's recruitment scheme into the police force backfired, for instead of making the career a lucrative one, it continues to propagate antagonism between the police and the people. Tlali observes that the source of the black policemen's pride lies in their mistaken belief that their meagre material possessions will somehow translate into political power. When that fails to happen, they vent their frustrations on civilians, mercilessly subjecting political detainees especially, to hideous living conditions. The black policemen fail to understand the political constraints which their career subjects them to, for the state prevents them from affiliating with any political movements which it deems subversive.

On the surface, "Detour into Detention" reveals the systematic susceptibility of black people's perpetual harassment by the police, but, more significantly, it illustrates the futile nature of offences for which black people get arrested. The ominous and political practicality of this title can be observed also in the short story "Dimomona" from the collection Soweto Stories. Boitumelo Kgope is arrested and taken to the infamous Potato Farm in the Eastern Transvaal, one of the government's popular hard labor prisons reserved specifically for black people. His crime is to leave his pass in his Sophiatown one-room shack at three o'clock in the morning. He is getting ready for work, and has just gone to relieve himself in the communal toilet when the police attack his compound with dogs and flashing torches in the people's faces, arresting people who fail to produce their passes as demanded. Not given a chance to fetch his pass from his shack, Boitumelo is immediately arrested and has his wrists manacled. He joins other "offenders" in a queue, and they are paraded so that other people can see the seriousness with which the government considers their "crime" before they are taken to prison. It will be four months of hard labor on the potato farm before Boitumelo is released to go home.

Boitumelo's arrest echoes countless other arrests for such "offences." The focus of this story is on the nature of Boitumelo's "crime" and its implications. It also reveals his fragile position in his relation to his denied right to earn a living, his denied right to stay with his family, and his denied right to relieve himself at any odd hour of the day or night. As it turns out, his wife is "visiting" him at the time of his arrest. Boitumelo and Dimomona cannot live together because she lacks the necessary papers to legalize her stay with him in the urban areas. Her visits become significant because they mark another period of conception for her. She will go back to the rural areas after the birth of their child, raise the child on her own, and only see her husband again either at Christmas time or at another time set aside for conception. The apartheid policy

relegates her to the position of baby-maker, and turns round to humiliate her by denying her the right to live with her husband and bring up their children together. She is denied the means of earning a living on a consistent basis, albeit the meagerness of her husband's salary. This forced separation results in children being brought up in the absence of their fathers, thus undermining the psychological need for bonding between fathers and their children.

When Boitumelo is arrested, Dimomona cannot join the job market, not because of the advanced stage of her pregnancy, but largely because as a black married woman, she is systematically declared a minor, and is therefore prevented from working in the cities without first obtaining a document confirming that she was born in the city, and also presenting to the labor office a written declaration from her husband permitting her to work. The reason for her husband's arrest emphasizes her precarious position of risking an arrest herself for trespassing. Dimomona's femaleness and married status enforce her domesticity which denies her the right to choose where she wants to live, and her right to join the paid labor force which will strengthen her political and economic condition. Even though she is not arrested with Boitumelo, the government's policy of job reservation and segregation renders her a prisoner just the same. Given her physical condition, she is now forced to rely on the goodwill of her neighbors in providing her with food, and performing household chores for her.

Boitumelo's fate is shared by Aunt Lizzy, another victim of the same influx control law. She is arrested for having entered the location of Kanana without a permit. Her offence is "trespassing," and she is likely to be kept in prison indefinitely. She expresses outrage at her situation, and comments on the irony of the place's name.

**How can we be trespassing when we have
only come to bury my uncle? It's crazy,**

crazy, I tell you. To think that Kanana means Canaan - 'the land of milk and honey'. Yet we have come here, to this Boer town of Klerksdorp, to be arrested.

(97)

Aunt Lizzy's arrest marks another 'detour into detention' because she gets arrested while on a visit to bury her uncle outside her own township. According to the influx control laws, she is supposed to have applied for a permit to leave her township and go to another one. Tlali concludes the story with the events at the hearing of Aunt Lizzy's case:

**'Elizabeth! Doris Mashinini...Stand up! Why did you not have permits to enter Kanaan Lokasi?'
We stood up and obeyed, taking our place in the long queue of 'trespass' prisoners.**

(101)

Tlali's analysis of these episodes makes a significant commentary on the South African government's policy on black people, and their contact with the law. It is important to note that Boitumelo is not given a chance to appeal, but is simply shipped to prison. Aunt Lizzy's jail period is anybody's guess. It could be thirty to ninety days, or even more than that, and she will not be granted bail, for the government does not provide bail concessions for such 'offenders'. Her trial does not guarantee a sentence, for her case could easily be remanded to an indefinite date. On the other hand, Tlali and her friends are allowed a legal representative (an unusual concession indeed), even though his services could be interrupted, or even terminated by the government at any time. These detours into detention offer a glimpse into the average lives of black people in South Africa, including those of children as young as ten years old. No consideration is made for their families who almost always have to trudge from one police station, prison, and even mortuary to another, trying to locate their relatives. The effects of the trauma suffered by black people due to these arrests and other injustices can only be remedied by the empowering acts of solidarity and resistance which can be carried out

through mass mobilizations as evident in Amandla. In an interview with an office cleaner, Tlali illustrates how vulnerable to dangers of physical assaults and death office workers are. Having to work odd hours, office cleaners are not provided with safe waiting rooms until sunrise, but have to leave the premises after working, this normally being at dawn. They thus become easy prey to thugs and ducktails as they commute from their work-places to home.

Given the humiliation that black women suffer, Tlali illustrates how they can empower themselves by getting together and transforming their oppression into effective defensive weapons and means of asserting their rights. She explores the theme of sisterhood in those stories that deal with women-to-women relationships. In the short story "'Masechaba's Erring 'Child'," Tlali illustrates how women can empower themselves by counselling each other on their thoughts and actions, and resolve sensitive issues without creating any animosity among them. The story is about 'Masechaba, an elderly widow of fifty, who awakens to the fact that her oppression of other women was due to her own oppression by her husband, Senatla. 'Masechaba had encouraged her husband to court other women so as to stabilize her own marriage. She reckoned that she could not deal with a distracted husband whose interest lay outside the house than inside. One of the objects of Senatla's fancy was Tholoana, whom he met when she was working at a bakery. Senatla's approach to Tholoana exudes the confidence of a wealthy man exercising his power over a materially deprived woman. So when Tholoana rejects Senatla's advances, he goes to tell his wife, who expresses her disapproval of Tholoana's decision:

'Yes, yes, I know everything, my dear,' she chipped in smiling. 'I even know that you refused him... How could you be so cruel anyway? Ntate loved you so much.... He was nearly sobbing like a child when he told me. I couldn't help feeling very sorry for him.'

(151)

Tholoana is shocked to learn that Senatla has actually told his wife about the incident. She feels humiliated by the reasons advanced by 'Masechaba for her husband's actions, and enters into a long tirade about 'Masechaba's insensitivity to other women's feelings, and her disrespect for their integrity. In defence of herself, 'Masechaba says:

I allowed him to enjoy himself just like you allow a child to play. He was like a child -- an erring child, that's all. I kept on hoping that one day he would grow up and stop his child-like ways but he never. I grew tired of trying, tired.

(160)

Tlali's ridicule of irresponsible men is communicated through the seemingly innocent and naive voice of 'Masechaba. In the end, it turns out that 'Masechaba understood all what her husband was doing, but because she had tried without success to discourage him, she finally relented. The laugh remains on Senatla, whose absence at this very interesting gathering fails to account for his foolish manners. The same kind of sisterhood is communicated by the working women in the short story "Fud-u-u-a," which literally means "Stir the Pot." The women lend support to each other as they face their daily lives of male oppression in its many faces. In a ceremonial way of garnering this solidarity among themselves, Mashadi says to her friends, Nkele and Ntombi:

Come, my sister, let us whisper. This corner here looks safer. They won't crush us here.

**Re basadi bo batlhe (sic); tlaeang re itshebeng
(we are all women; come, let us whisper to one another)**
(33)

The theme of the story centers around the humiliation of women by men as they commute on the trains. The train rides subject them to robbery and revolting fondling of their bodies by thugs, while other people pretend not to notice anything, and prefer to join in the singing. As Nkele narrates her experiences, one can feel the nausea that accompanies the experience. She tells her friends:

Those who could lift up their hands, started clapping them - *hard*. I wanted the music to stop because, instead of helping, the very noise was being used as a "shield". I was trying to scream that someone was busy massaging my thighs and backside, trying to probe into my private parts and nobody was paying attention. It was embarrassing and awful! That day, I thanked God for having given me big powerful thighs because all I did was cross them over one another and squeeze as hard as I could. I clenched my teeth and wished that I were *grinding* those fingers between my thighs. You see, with so much congestion, it was impossible to see who the culprits were.

(41)

Nkele is humiliated even more by the conspiracy of the singing people, for their voices drown her own pleas for help. Mashadi and Ntombi can only nod in helpless acknowledgment of Nkele's story. They have also experienced the same humiliation as their friend in one way or another. Mashadi can hardly tell of her experiences because of their bitter memories. The confusion and shock created in her mind leave her with no words to relate her story. All she can talk about is the crowdedness of the train, which, with its noisy sound as it sways from side to side, seems to collaborate with the offenders. One can imagine the perverse pleasure that the offender derives from the deafening sound of the train wheels as they go "**gadlang-gadlang, gadlang-gadlang, gadlang-gadlang,**" while the victim is crying her lungs out in utter desperation for help.

The three women's experiences are echoed in another short story, "Devil at a Dead end," where a train journey from Ficksburg Station to Bethlehem turns into a nightmare as a young woman travelling alone is sexually abused by one of the white railway guards. After ascertaining that the young woman is left alone in her compartment as the other passenger has reached her destination, the guard approaches her, and abusing

his position of authority as a white male train guard on a lone black woman passenger, lets himself into her compartment and says to the girl:

"Don't be afraid, please. Come; just stand up. Come, man, don't be lazy. Just stand up and let's have some fun. Just a little love making," the guard implored, touching her slim shoulders tenderly and stroking them. "Come. It won't hurt, please. Come on, hold me tight, tight!" he demanded, taking the girl's hands and crossing them behind him. The girl slackened her grip, but he stopped her. "Don't do that, please. All right, just clasp me against you and I'll be satisfied."

(115-16)

Terrified by the guard's actions, and fully aware of the absence of a public podium where she can voice her complaint as a victim, the young woman feels confused and at a loss for words. However, as the guard leaves her compartment to attend to his duties at a station, the girl examines her situation, and chastises herself for seeming to be a willing partner in her own assault. As Tlali puts it:

The girl sat trembling and feeling guilty. She reprimanded herself, I should be screaming for help or something. She sat waiting. She was surprised at herself. She had been like a bewildered beholder, powerless. She had abandoned herself into the arms of a strange white man who did not even know her name. An expert who obviously knew what he was doing. She was taken aback at what seemed to be a response by a part of herself over which she had no control. She felt like a being apart, looking on. She waited, dismayed.

(116)

Tlali succeeds in communicating the confusion and suspense that the girl experiences during the guard's absence. Trying hard to think of a plan to ease her out of her predicament, she finally says to her tormentor:

"Se nkame hobane ke silafetse ... ke metse *mokaola!*"

which means, "do not touch me because I am afflicted with a venereal disease." The mere mention of the word "mokaola" has an immediate effect on the guard, for it quickly disarms him of his white male authoritative weapon. Without any waste of time, he leaves the woman in her compartment, and retreats like a "recoiling devilish figure." Tlali's contempt for the guard's behavior is communicated in her reference to him as a recoiling devilish figure, thus comparing him to a serpent. She refrains from giving us the details about the young woman, and refers to her as "the girl" or as "she." Her identity is insignificant, for her experiences reflect the multitudes of experiences suffered by women on the trains. The victims' silence after such incidents does not in any way suggest their consent to their own assaults, but is a result of a system that collaborates in their victimization. Tlali footnotes this short story by stating that it was banned in South Africa in 1979 because of the censors' claim that it portrays white people negatively. Such actions only help to give more power to the offenders, and perpetuates the myth that women are less than fully human, and that they are just mere sexual objects.

All of these stories deal with some of the many forms of women's oppression in South Africa. The stories confirm the fact that their oppression will remain a reality as long as apartheid remains a policy in the country. Tlali balances the content of her fiction by talking about the strengths of women. In one of her travelogues, "Setsumi Qoqolosi," Tlali experiences the ultimate joy of reaching the top of Mount Qoqolosi. That has been her main objective for a long time. The mystery surrounding the mountain top had always challenged her wits as a woman, and she finally undertakes the journey to reach the peak of the mountain, and to live to tell the tale. She communicates her sense of pride when her travelling companion says to her:

"Ke mona, he ... Refihlile qoeng!"

which means, "Here it is, then ... We have reached the top!" She goes on to say:

My mind literally wallowed in the maddening idea of such success. I had achieved my main objective. I had conquered the Qoqolosi. At that moment, I thought I knew just how a man like Sir Edmund Hillary felt when he reached the top of Mount Everest; or Scott on triumphantly reaching the South Pole! The only regrettable difference between the two heroes and myself was that I had not been the first to get there. Someone had been there before me and had planted a steel peg marked with figures - presumably stating the highest point of elevation. I could not read the wire. I could not hoist my own flag on the summit of Mount Qoqolosi as the first Sowetan who had *done it!* All the same, I had been victorious. I had made it to the very pinnacle of the Qoqolosi!

(63-64)

The symbolic conquering of this conferred male feat signifies her determination to define her womanhood by defying some male codes of oppression. Even her overseas trips do not fill her with the same sense of achievement as her climbing to the top of Mount Qoqolosi. However, this story would have solidly stood out as one of the highlights of female determination had it not been for its digression into the idyllic narrative of the Basutho's cultural courtship, as opposed to courtship in Johannesburg. Tlali's juxtaposition of lovers in Lesotho with lovers in Jo'burg creates an unnecessary tension between romantic idealism and romantic necessity, and veers our attention from the glory of reaching the top of Qoqolosi. The lovers' nest that Tlali and her company almost disturb also serves to dissolve that glory, because Tlali does not make it clear whether the young woman consummating her love on the top of the mountain is also thrilled about reaching the top. Again, the hastened arrival at the top of Mount Qoqolosi is overplayed, thus failing to communicate Tlali's sense of achievement adequately. Tlali fails to build a powerful base for the story's climax, as the narrative expressing the rising action fails to communicate the excitement leading to the peak of the story, and the peak of the mountain as well. The whole exercise is thus carried out

without much effort, and yet Tlali had built our expectations through the title. As for the contented young bride who gaily goes about her daily chores of sweeping her mother-in-law's courtyard very early in the morning while casting longing glances at Qoqolosi, instead of infusing in her a sense of elevation as a woman aspiring for greater heights, Mount Qoqolosi reduces her to someone who treasures her domesticity and servility.

In her quest for self-fulfillment, Tlali ventures beyond her culturally prescribed boundaries of assigning her entire life to household duties, and comes across other women whose lives bear testimony to the fact that a defiance of patriarchal domination is empowering in that it grants them the voice and space to articulate their idiosyncratic concerns as women in their own right. The interviews with Leah Koae, a dressmaker, and Lillian Ngoyi, a political leader, illustrate Tlali's reverence for women whose struggle for survival epitomizes their courage. Most aspects of Leah's and Lillian's life stories illuminate the daily experiences of thousands of other black women in South Africa. Tlali chooses the interview genre in dialogue with Leah and Lillian because of the genre's privileged immediacy in getting at experience and subjectivity. The transparent expression of the interview as a text legitimizes the whole exercise, for it is Leah's and Lillian's voices that penetrate through the written text, and create a dialogue with the reader. Leah tells of her material survival through her sewing creativity, an occupation which she embraces out of her rejection of subjecting her entire life to being under the employ of another person. Lillian directs all her creative energy towards articulating the concerns of black South African women through her voice and political activism. Both women speak freely of their experiences, for they appreciate the importance of sharing their experiences with other women whose experiences may not have the good fortune of being embraced by the written text. Their stories inspire courage and determination in a world that is inclined to undermine a woman's voice in

articulating her thoughts about issues that concern her directly. Tlali quotes Lillian's response to prison officials' questions during one of her many prison detentions. After being repeatedly interrogated, and cast into solitary confinement for long spells of time, Lillian is asked:

"What are you trying to do; what do you hope to achieve with your stubborn attitude of continuing with this kind of senseless preoccupation?"

and she replies:

"I am doing what I know is right."

(55)

The self assured-response from Lillian expresses her convictions in her political beliefs. Her detention illustrates how oppression can be encoded as a discursive dilemma in that it raises the question of black women's relation to power and discourse. To deflect that dilemma, Lillian devotes her life to the strategic situation of black women's relations to power and discourse through her active involvement in progressive politics. In her world travels, Lillian sensitizes her audience to the plight of black women, whose oppression is maintained through their systematic distance from the politics of power and ruling. Her outspokenness in politics is a means to initiate discourse with the ruling class, so that their oppression of other races is exposed. Tlali illustrates her belief in the empowerment inherent in the sharing of personal experiences, especially among people in similar oppressive situations. The spirit of solidarity is assured at such meetings, and participants leave the sessions empowered because of their realization of the commonality of their problems and the availability of help for those who need it. Of importance also, is that Tlali interviews known personalities and ordinary women alike. Lillian was known in South Africa because of her political activism, and Leah is not so well known. Tlali's recognition of the efforts of "ordinary" people like Leah, and her bringing their lives to the attention of readers

empower not only those women, but also readers who would have thought of their own experiences as uninteresting or unimportant because they are not "exceptional." The nonfictive nature of the interview genre legitimates these "unexceptional" women's experiences, and transform them into texts that can interchangeably function as fiction or non-fiction. Whereas Tlali's interview with Lillian is conducted with an air of reverence and high constraint because of Lillian's social and political status, inevitably retaining its nonfictive, real life quality, the one with Leah assumes fictive and dramatic characteristics because of the active dialogue between Tlali and Leah and the other women present. The company at Leah's place present a real life scenario, sharing their ideas with us, and validating their experiences as just as important as those of Lillian and other women in her position.

Tlali communicates a sense of fulfillment against all odds in her autobiographical novel Muriel at Metropolitan. She reconstructs her experiences of working at Metropolitan Radio, a busy electronics store located in central Johannesburg catering to lower income blacks and whites. The firm is a microcosm of South African urban life with its variety of people and their curious relationships with one another. The protagonist is a black woman, Muriel, whose position as an accounts typist at the store constantly forces her to reflect on her moral commitment to her people. Her troubled dialogue with her inner self questions her implicit collaboration with a system that charges unduly high interest rates to black customers even though they can ill afford them. Her inner tension is compounded by the contempt with which her Jewish boss, Mr. Bloch, and other white employees, treat her, and the rest of the black people coming into the store. In the eyes of her boss, Muriel's level of education and her competence at work are totally incompatible with her race and gender. She is thus viewed with suspicion, and is deliberately placed in situations that are systematically meant to embarrass her. Tlali illustrates how an employees' race and gender determine

not only her salary, but also the kind of gift she receives for Christmas. Muriel's conversation with Mrs. Ludorf, a white co-worker, reveals Mr. Bloch's discriminatory policy of remunerating his employees. After hesitantly enquiring about Muriel's standard of education, Mrs. Ludorf asks her:

**... How much did your boss give you for Christmas bonus?
Nothing, but he gave me a travelling rug worth about eight rands.
What, a lousy blanket, after all these years?
That's a shame! And you know what he gave them?**

(187)

Mr. Bloch's choice of a present for Muriel is significant, for not only does it fulfill the white South African stereotypical association of African women with traditional blankets for adornment, but it also reveals his meanness, and his total disrespect for Muriel. The blanket's monetary value is an accurate reflection of Muriel's value in Mr. Bloch's eyes. In spite of her loyalty to the firm, Muriel is still treated with contempt by her employer, and is equally despised by the white women employees. Tlali's narrative illustrates how Mr. Bloch maintains material superiority and control over his employees by offering them gifts that can only be meant to insult their senses of self worth, and also guarantee their economic dependency on him. The different dimensions of racial, material and sexual power are interconnected through the power of language to shape reality in relation to the power of desire to promote subjugation.¹ Mrs. Ludorf's conversation with Muriel does not result from any genuine concern, but is based upon her white superiority complex which she derives from the larger socio-political system. Her questions betray her inner desire to retain her privileged position as a white woman over a black woman. They also point to the threat that Muriel poses to her as an efficient and educated black woman. As Muriel notes, Mrs. Ludorf used

to comment about her (Muriel's) vital statistics and diet as a way of asserting her superiority over Muriel because of her unflattering weight.

Muriel's resigned tone in the above passage confirms her earlier assertion that she does not want to stage a "one woman's protest" against her employer. However, her worst moments of frustration occur when she has to ask the black customers for their particulars and pass books before she can process their Hire Purchase applications.

Muriel expresses her ambiguous feelings:

**... Every time I was forced to be loyal to the firm
I would get those cramps deep in my entrails.
Every time I asked for a black customer's passbook
I would feel like a policeman who in this country is
a symbol of oppression. I would continue to feel
like a traitor, part of a conspiracy, a machine
deliberately designed to crush the soul of people.**

**To a person without reasoning powers, Metropolitan
Radio was a wonderful place. I could go on working
there as long as I wanted. But I would have to give
my best and receive very little in return. My
presence would be felt but never recognised, let
alone rewarded. I would have to remain static,
junior, for the rest of my working life,
irrespective of my experience and my proficiency, a
shock absorber, ready to be used on demand. I
would literally have to trample on my conscience, to
gobble it up (as we say in our language).
Every time a black customer paid more than he was
supposed to, I would have to keep quiet 'in loyalty
to the firm.'**

(140).

Tlali's dialogism in this passage reflects not only Muriel's relationship with other people, but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of herself that constitute that matrix of black female subjectivity.² Muriel wrestles with her conscience which forces her into a double versed discourse with the dissonances engendered by the hostilities towards her social relations. During her meditative moments on her working conditions, Muriel is haunted by a specter of herself as a policeman, a personified

symbol of that level of oppression only a black South African can understand. Much as her language reveals her consciousness of her oppressive conditions, her social relations enforce those conditions. These conflicts of interest define her socially constructed subjectivity which she experiences out of her mistaken assumption of the guilt, responsibility, and blame for the inefficiencies of the status quo. Her silent conspiracy with the firm's cheating is therefore not done out of sheer ignorance, but is a result of forced "loyalty," even at the expense of a troubled conscience and a deafening pounding of the heart.

Gaining control over her weakness imposed by her conditioned acceptance of her socially constructed subjectivity that functions to question her moral fibre, Muriel finally allows her politically informed consciousness to deliver her from her prevailing oppressive situation of fraud, to an honest position of exposing the evil practices of the firm. As she speaks, she articulates the dilemmas and conflicts of many other politically conscious people whose positions at work place them at discord with their inner convictions. Their proletarian political allegiance is mercilessly questioned by their types of jobs which often make them compromise their political commitment in order to make a living. However, the benefits derived from confronting these conflicts, and articulating them, far outweigh the risks involved in the continued conspiracy in a condemned venture. Muriel's inner subjectivity is ultimately reconciled with her convictions within a milieu that is bent on denying her her rights to take decisions on her own.

However, when her working conditions fail to improve, but actually get worse, she takes a firm stance, and resigns, ultimately freeing herself from the shackles which had bound not only her hands but her soul as well. Her resignation confirms her political commitment to the people, for it reconciles all her conflicting inner voices and brings

her peace and a clear conscience. The end of the novel portrays Muriel's determination to uphold righteousness, and to reclaim her pride and dignity in the face of the looming threat of financial difficulty. Her resolute decision is captured in the words:

**When I took my bag and said to the boss 'Good night, Mr. Bloch' for the last time, I did not know what the future held in store for me. I did not care. I had no regrets. All I knew was that I could not continue to be part of the web that has been woven to entangle the people whom I love and am part of. I would never again place myself in a position in which I had to ask for pass-books or 'be loyal to the firm' at my own people's expense. My conscience would be clear.
And I added, as I looked into Mr. Bloch's eyes:
'Thanks for everything.'**

(190)

Muriel's resoluteness is a celebration of her determination to honor her convictions. It endorses her victory over all the political, social, economic, and sexual constraints imposed on her life, and paves the way for other women to follow. The whole situation recharacterizes the text as a site for social and sexual struggles and contestations, rather than simple conduits of power.³ In her essay "Reading Family Matters," Deborah McDowell echoes Judith Fetterley's argument that the sense of power is derived from the experience of perceiving oneself as central, as subject.⁴ When Muriel resigns from Metropolitan Radio, she does that out of her perception of herself as the center from which all else evolves. Her actions are centrifugal, for she stands right at the center and influences all actions around her. The white women start competing for her position even though it will cost the store three times what Muriel received. Her resignation strips Mr. Bloch of his power, because his authority as the subject is usurped through Muriel's assumption of that very subjecthood. She moves from the position of a victim to that of an individual who believes in her own consciousness, and is empowered to take control of her life. Her voice concludes the text, for Mr. Bloch's voice no longer has any legitimacy at this stage. Once more,

that dialectical relation of oppression and resistance emerges as the core character of a South African black woman's experience. Tlali empowers black women by illustrating that they can be at the center of their lives irrespective of the social relations that collaborate to marginalize them.

Notes

¹ Chris Weedon, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 26.

² Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues," Changing Our Own Words, ed. Cheryl Wall (Rutgers: State University, 1989) 18.

³ Nancy Hartstock, "Foucault on Power," Feminism/Postmodernism ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990) 169.

⁴ Deborah E. McDowell, "Reading Family Matters," Changing Our Own Words, ed. Cheryl Wall (1989) 83.

Chapter 3

Conversations with Miriam Tlali

Published black women novelists in South Africa made their debut onto bookstore shelves in 1975 through the publication of Miriam Tlali's Muriel at Metropolitan. The South African Censorship and Publications Boards kept a tight lid on creative writing by black people, even though black men were able to publish albeit under very stringent circumstances. Muriel at Metropolitan was published in 1975 by Ravan Press in Johannesburg, and it was immediately banned in South Africa as soon as Longman took up its publication rights overseas. The South African government's tradition of stifling the voice of creativity in the country had reared its ugly head again, and Tlali joined the long list of banned or silenced people whose printed works and ideas were prohibited from being circulated in their own country.¹ Undaunted by the government's intimidations, Tlali went on to help found **Staffrider** in 1978, a magazine published by Ravan Press. **Staffrider** aimed at reviving the spirit of **Drum**, a monthly magazine which appeared in the fifties and sixties, and had the potential of promoting literary renaissance in the black community largely because of its attention to themes that had immediate social relevance, as opposed to the themes purported by the missionaries.² **Staffrider** availed itself to the writings of young black poets and novelists, and deliberately established collective rather than individual identities. One of its mainstays was its policy of little editorial work as a symbol of its rejection of the imposition of bourgeois elitist standards in a magazine designed to serve the disadvantaged masses. Although its very first issue, Africa My Beginning was banned in May 1979, as was the second issue, Call Me Not A Man, the magazine continued to function, and even forced itself into the consciousness of academic publications in the country. Other works by Tlali that suffered the wrath of the Publications Board in

South Africa included the novel Amandla, (which was also the sixth series of Staffrider), the play Crimen Injuria, and some short stories like "Devil at a Dead end" and "The Point of No Return." Amandla had been on sale for just three weeks when it was declared undesirable for public consumption because of its political content, and was banned as a result.

When I met Tlali for an arranged interview at her home in Lesotho, Southern Africa, on 12 November 1992,³ I was struck by her presence which asserted itself in a very engaging manner. Her face exhibited an indestructible gaiety that conceals the bitter price she continues to pay for raising her voice to challenge the immoral apartheid system. Born in Johannesburg and exposed to the impulses of a curious urban setting that fascinates and simultaneously repulses all those who inhabit it, Tlali internalized the experiences that shape the fabric of her writing. In the ensuing interview, Tlali spoke at length about what it means to be a black woman writer in South Africa. The seeds of what turned out to be a frustrating and equally rewarding career for this author are watered by the political situation in South Africa, and the denigrating experiences through which it puts the entire black nation. I asked Tlali to articulate her motivations for writing, and to give a short profile of her writing career, and this is what she had to say:

I started writing in the early sixties, and I was prompted by the political situation that affected me as a black person. However, I did not have enough time to concentrate on it, and before I could start thinking seriously about it, I was detained at Robben Island. When I left the Island in 1962, I went back to Jo'burg. The general mood was most uncertain. There was no political activity going on, and within a few months, the Rivonia Treason Trial was held. But I became really restless because there seemed to be no prospects at all for black people. After the trial, the leaders were jailed, the memories of Sharpeville and Langa continued to linger on people's minds, some leaders died, many

others left the country, the political movements were banned, and then people refrained from discussing politics openly, because fear was instilled in them by the government with its machinations. The whole situation became depressing, and I felt even more depressed because I was always involved in political activities from the time I was a student in Sophiatown and Western Native Township as well. I became frustrated, and something in me urged me to start writing. Yet, I did not have the time to devote to writing. Then, when I started working at a furniture store, and I studied the faces of the black people coming into the store to buy and pay their accounts, I saw the forced silence and humility with which they carried their lives. I became even more restless. I felt even more pressurised to do something about that uneasy quiet that had taken over. You could see the anger of the people boiling underneath as they were forced to remain quiet. But I was not going to be quiet, and I thought it the time to start writing. I realised that I had to write about the situation as it was, and give my manuscript to anybody who would be willing to publish it. I had to get all that frustration out. And it was only after I had started writing that I experienced the most peaceful moments of my life, even though my circumstances were difficult. I was nursing my terminally ill mother at the time, and I was out of work and I couldn't get another job because of my qualifications. My life was generally at a low ebb. I would have surely landed in a mental asylum had I not sat down to write then. The pressure was just unbearable, and writing brought me a great deal of relief, and released some of the anger that was in me ...

Tlali would have continued with her story had I not interrupted her. Her response reveals a great deal about herself as an individual and as a black woman writer in South Africa. The absence of sufficient time to devote to writing increased in Tlali the fervor to write. What with the government's policy of silencing black authors, and the cultural codes of male domination that prohibit female authorship as a form of self-expression, and prescribes domesticity as the sole realm of female experience? Tlali's existential antithesis to oppression as a black woman in a hostile world sharpened her awareness of her socio-political reality, and created in her a sense of self that found meaning in the reconstruction of her situation through her writing. Therefore, the lack

of time for writing and the unbearable political situation in which she found herself were the very driving forces for her vocation. Writing afforded her the opportunity to reflect on her environment, and to respond by creating a vision of an alternative situation. Her experiences of working in a city store where she came across black people who seemed resigned to containing their frustration instead of venting it out obliged her to give a voice to their silent suffering.

Tlali's first novel, Muriel at Metropolitan, was initially called Between Two Worlds. This title was meant to express the systematic polarities in the socio-political structure between blacks and whites in South Africa. Tlali wrote as a clerk at a city store, a vantage point that gave her a glimpse into the white world and its impressions of black people, while she remained firmly rooted in her black enclave. In her essay, "Speaking in Tongues," Henderson comments on the position of black women writers which empowers them to speak in dialogically racial and gendered voices to the other(s) both within and without.⁴ Their political and material dispositions which sometimes allow them proximity to white people, reveal the contradictions inherent in the white people's thoughts concerning their treatment of blacks. Patricia Hill Collins writes in Black Feminist Thought that as outsiders within, black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies.⁵ It is these contradictions that demystified white people's power in the eyes of Muriel, and stressed her self-affirmation as a black woman. However revealing the title is of race relations in South Africa, Tlali had to change it due to the pressure from her publishers. She remains not very pleased with the new title, and would prefer subsequent editions to use the old title, especially because it is still as relevant today as it was two decades ago. Her anthology of short stories suffered a similar fate because its original title was Mehlala Khatamping, later translated to Footprints in the Quagmire, but became popularly known as Soweto Stories. Tlali chose the title

because of its evocation of the uncertainty of life in South Africa. Each story in the anthology symbolizes a journey through the political wasteland that South Africa has become. A quagmire or cesspool conjures up images of nauseating instability of marshy and slippery places when translated into physical terms. The stories in the anthology do communicate that level of precarious existence that is the lot of black people in South Africa. Were it not for censorship problems, Tlali would have translated the stories into three or four African languages to make them accessible to those who do not speak Sesotho.

The change of the anthology's original title to the sensational Soweto Stories came because the publishers anticipated more publicity for the anthology. South African politics was gaining wide coverage in the media in most overseas countries at the time, and the publishers were simply using their entrepreneurial acumen to boost their sales. Whether the strategy was effective or not, the fact remains that the vigil with the flies and the bed bugs remains a daytime reality for black people in South Africa, and until the government undergoes a political, cultural, and more importantly, moral "Metamorphosis," there will always be a "Devil at a Dead end." Black people will remain "*bo'Mma-Lithoto*" because of the influx control laws, and they need to continue to fight on, get into the rhythm of "Fud-u-u-a" and reach "The Point of No Return," until their political life is as sweet as "*Dimomona*." By whatever name, Tlali's fiction still communicates the intended meaning.

When I asked Tlali about her plays, her response outlined other publishing problems that black writers face. Her first play, Khodumodumo, was written in 1978, but was never published because it was written in Sesotho. Tlali felt that the English medium for this play would deprive it of its resonance because of some Sesotho linguistic constructions that cannot be translated or even appropriated in English or any of the

European languages. However, the reluctance to publish this play arose because of the then political controversies surrounding literature written in any of the black languages spoken in the country. As she says, the publishing house that would have been willing to take the play was the semi-official government Afrikaans Perskor which **"would have been too eager to label me as another Mosotho writer."** Besides that, Tlali would have been restricted by the government's blueprint on the linguistic style and thematic content of all books published by Perskor.⁶ Had Tlali published the play, she would have found it difficult to publish in English, because her play would have been used to categorize her linguistically. Tlali then joined an association of black writers whose consciousness of the government's attempts at further segregating them along linguistic and tribal groups brought them together into an agreement of writing only in English, so as not to isolate and stifle themselves as apartheid's policy had intended. The decision was meant to defy the government, and not to make their works inaccessible to the non-English speaking black masses. English was then used not so much as a vehicular medium, but as an expression of their defiance of the government, and also as a unifying medium of communication among black people. Emphasis on African language communication has since been renewed by many writers today. Their concern is to have an impact on their immediate communities, thereby heightening the position of the artist as a people's voice.

As soon as Tlali had settled the language question, she was faced with another set of publishing problems. Apart from the fact that most of her works were written in English, they were also targeted because they were written by a black woman, and they were critical of the government's policies. The effects of such censorships were disastrous not only to Tlali herself, but to the whole literary milieu in the black community as well. Not only did they create a cultural vacuum, but they also led to the erroneous belief in the intellectual uncompetitiveness of South African black

women. By the time Muriel at Metropolitan was published, at least two black South African women had already published their novels abroad. Noni Jabavu, author of two autobiographical novels--Drawn in Color (1960) and The Ochre People (1963), and Bessie Head, author of When Rainclouds Gather (1969), Maru (1971), and A Question of Power (1973), were already receiving critical attention when South Africans inside the country were beginning to hail a local black woman novelist. Jabavu was married to an Englishman, and lived in England when her novels were published. Suffice to say that her works would not have seen the light of day had she tried to publish them in South Africa. She would also have been affected by the Censorship Act, despite the fact that her novels communicate a subtle involvement with the South African racial theme, as opposed to Tlali's explicit rejection of the political status quo. Head moved to Botswana in 1964 when the humiliation of being colored in South Africa prevented her from remaining inside the country any longer. Her migration offers cold comfort in the sense that her stay in Botswana did not present her with an ideal life either, because "...such tremendous pressure has built up against me in this little village and I shall get no help from the police if my life is in danger."⁷ It is tragic to note that Head would fear for her life to the point of needing the help of the police against the village people in Botswana, a classic reversal of fortunes, the tyranny of place.

While Head was contemplating police help in Botswana, Tlali was devising means of avoiding them in order to protect her manuscripts from being seized. Most of her manuscripts still lie buried in her yard in Soweto, a fact that Tlali reveals with a mixture of victory and defeat. The air of uncertainty that continues to hang on the South African political and literary landscapes makes Tlali's revelation an open secret. When I commented on the tone of nostalgia when she talked about her hidden manuscripts and a number of valuable books that she bought during her overseas trips, Tlali responded:

A part of me lies buried with those manuscripts and books, and another part of me survives above the ground. I feel so unwholesome, so torn apart, as if I am trying to live two lives at the same time. This whole thing is strenuous. It drains me of all strength.

Tlali's sentiments echo the very essence of black existence in South Africa--a fragmented existence that is alienated from life itself. Much as the longing to retain her manuscripts and books surpassed the necessity to bury them, Tlali had to hide them if she valued them enough. The idea of having them confiscated by the security police on any of their unannounced visits would have destroyed her completely. Indeed, some South Africa writers were destroyed by the sheer weight of the censorship policies. Those who come immediately to mind are Bessie Head, Can Themba, and Todd Matshikiza, all of whom died in exile, and Nat Nakasa, who committed suicide within a year in exile. Tlali did what was most expedient at the time, and that amounted to burying part of herself in her own yard. She has since relocated to Lesotho in a quest for peace of mind and a revival of the writer inside her.

Tlali responded to my inquiry into her views about Feminism and Womanism enthusiastically. First, she declared that she is both a feminist and a womanist, and candidly added that **"there are as many feminisms and womanisms as there are women in the world."** Tlali's response reflected the existence of multiple feminisms and womanisms among black South African women, and pointed to the fact that each of these concepts should recognize the peculiar position of black women in South Africa, and appreciate its distinction from that of other black women in independent Africa and the diaspora. Most black women have internalized the patriarchal system of oppression and domination not only because of their historical distance from the social relations of power and discourse, but also because of their psychological conditioning into accepting their own subjugation. Even today, black women are still removed from

any centers of power and discourse, irrespective of the efforts by (other black) women in the liberation movements to legitimate the black women's voices, visibilities and presence. The interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression, all of which are maintained through the capitalist mode of operation, make it difficult for feminism to be separated from national liberation in Southern Africa. As a political construct, feminism incorporates all the struggles by women to move toward the centers of political power and discourse. As Patricia Hill Collins asserts, becoming a feminist is a transformational process of struggling to develop new interpretations of familiar realities.⁸ The continued subjugation of women makes it difficult for some of them to embrace feminist thoughts and ideas because of the contradictions they engender in their minds. This lack of clarity in feminist issues has led many women to believe that feminism is only an abstract idea whose practicality is still to surface. Most black women in South Africa perceive feminism as a "white thing" or an "overseas thing" which has no relevance in their present reality. Their unfamiliarity with the dynamics of feminism and its empowering nature, gives rise to this kind of perception. Although most of them are engaged in self-enhancing projects, and have moved from protest politics to development and reconstruction politics, they still view feminism as removed from their daily struggles. Their perceptions of feminism illustrate their distance from a concerted self conscious struggle to reject patriarchal perceptions of themselves, and to appreciate their own ideas and actions. The need for the definition of concepts for these women will prove empowering not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of their entire communities as well.

Tlali also commented on the intricacies of power politics and male domination, and illustrated how they make it difficult for women to recognize their oppression, and effectively fight for their liberation. For the women who are actively involved in progressive politics, their approaches to feminism is communicated through such

phrases as "A Woman's Place is in the Struggle," "Buang Basadi/Women Speak," "A Woman's Day Today is Freedom Day Tomorrow," "Wathinthi 'Mfazi, Wathinthi 'Mbokhoto" (You Struck a Woman, You Struck a Rock), to name but a few. All these phrases address the issue of sexism which is often concealed by our cultural codes of behavior. Tlali addresses the issue of sexism in her fiction, and points to the fact that its resolution depends on women's liberation from political and cultural constraints. However, the majority of black women still depend on their menfolk for material gain, and arguably remain easy prey for sexual assault and exploitation, and by extension, political voice. Tlali went on to say that feminism can make a headway only if it could recognize the heterogeneous composition of women in any society, and refrained from aspiring to become a comprehensive concept which views women as homogeneous, irrespective of their diverse experiences. It is because of these diverse experiences that Tlali advocates black women's voices if a strong black feminist movement is to be formed.

Black women, by virtue of being black and female, have to struggle for survival, irrespective of their education and other achievements. Money never mediates for them at all. Tlali's position is a case in point, because even though she manages a family business, that does not improve her status in her community, even though it places her in a different category from a local university woman professor or a domestic worker. It is these very hierarchies within the women's struggle that demand a careful re-evaluation of the definition of feminism to make it representative of more women than it presently does. In Muriel at Metropolitan, Tlali illustrates how Muriel's education and efficiency at work never mediate for her, but continue to alienate her from any position of power and influence. Tlali has internalized that seemingly secondary position herself, because most of her female characters assume supportive roles when placed next to male characters. She communicates a different kind of feminism,

something more akin to womanism than the Western concept of feminism, because she contends that the struggle for power, i.e. political and material power, encompasses the struggle for sexual liberation. According to her, male abuse of females stems from their political power over females. It is the male fear of the female power to reproduce herself that makes males to hold on to power and refuse to share it with females. Pholoso and Felleng characterize this dichotomy of power relations in the novel Amandla. Felleng illustrates part of her female power by letting Pholoso go and fight for *their* liberation, because it is not Pholoso that she is after, but political power itself. Likewise, Muriel resigns from Metropolitan Radio when she is denied any amount of power.

Given that very enlightening view about women's perspectives of their own situation, I asked Tlali to give me an assessment of her own work in the light of other female critics. I cited Oladele Taiwo, who thinks of Amandla for example, as just "political" and devoid of aesthetics. Tlali's response was that she was not unfamiliar with such criticism, and affirmed that Amandla is indeed a political novel which depends on social realism for its plot and characters. Far from being a mere extrapolation of life, it carries an urgent message of solidarity to people who are active in the political struggle in South Africa. Tlali also conceded that it is not surprising that people should view her novel as such because it was written with a black South African audience in mind, an audience that desperately needed a reflection of their ideas and experiences by an individual who possesses the experience. Her immediate audience gives a solid foundation to the content of her texts, and it is those rhythms and impulses of township life that propel the direction that her work takes. Tlali's response raised a lot of concerns which will be dealt with in chapter 4. She also stressed the point that Amandla is a female novel in that it is the voices of women which give directions to male actions.

Tlali regards herself as unaccomplished, not only as a writer, but as a community member as well. She hopes to complete another novel in a year or two, and also translate the short stories from the anthology Soweto Stories into several African languages. She would also like to get more involved with women in her community, only if she could be relieved of her domestic commitments. Her relocation to Lesotho was partly due to her desire to attend to family matters that needed her immediate consideration. The reality of her situation is expressed in her early life, where she could not get started with her writing because of lack of time. In another interview that was conducted in 1988, Tlali told her interviewers that " ... you have to dream about it, and black women do not have time to dream."⁹ This was in response to a question about her status as the only black woman novelist in South Africa for a long time. She attributed the fact to the unavailability of resources, which was compounded by the difficulty to attain complete peace of mind. Implicit in her response was the intermittent police harassment both in South Africa and Lesotho. Her house has been ransacked several times, and she has been forced to report at police stations regularly. This was in addition to prison detentions, including the time she spent at Robben Island, before her release in 1962. Her vulnerability to police actions interfered with her stream of thought, and caused her a lot of anxiety. Also, the expense involved in writing usually puts barriers to a struggling writer, because she has to have those resources at hand in order to get started. The only practical consolation Tlali derives from her career is the opportunity to travel abroad, make new friends, have her novels published and translated, and more importantly, be able to inform the world about the plight of black women in South Africa.¹⁰ Incidentally, it is these travels that provide her with peace of mind, mainly because of her distance from oppressive situations in her home country. Her novels have been translated into several languages: French, Dutch, German, Polish, Danish and Japanese. However, Tlali regrets the fact that her

compatriots had been denied the right to read her books, when people abroad could even read translations. Tlali's sentiments about censorship were expressed almost twenty years ago by another South African writer and critic, Ezekiel Mphahlele, when he said in an interview:

One of the painful things that I experienced when I was abroad was that I was writing and the books that I was writing were read by people outside, whereas I was really writing out of my South African experience...And then I ask myself, "What is the use, if people you write about don't read what you're writing?"¹¹

Likewise, Tlali felt the frustration of having to write for an audience that was prevented by legislation to read her works. Although she never left the country like Mphahlele and other writers did, she felt the effects of censorship just as acutely as those who were in exile abroad.

In concluding our interview, I asked Tlali to read from Muriel at Metropolitan. The passage she read is towards the end of the novel, and it is about Muriel's telephone conversation with Mr. Saladino, her prospective employer because she was planning to resign from Metropolitan Radio. Tlali brought the text to life with all the intonations and gestures intended. The effect was dramatic, the humor ironic, and to listen to Tlali reading that passage herself was to understand the poignancy of naked racism. The most revealing lines were:

Because they tell me now I must build another toilet, you know. They say we can't use the same toilet because you are non-white.

But I can use the same toilet as your other black workers, the ones who work in your garage.

No, no, no. If they know I have a non-white girl here working for me, and I don't have a separate toilet for her, they'll charge me.

and later

I really want you to come and work for me but the law makes it impossible. They even say I have to have a change-room for you.

(188-89)

Because of the autobiographical nature of the novel, I asked Tlali if she feels any anger and hatred towards apartheid, and she said, "yes, I do feel angry, but I harbour no hatred in me. It is self-consuming, and I think I am above that feeling." The interview was thus concluded on that note of optimism.

Notes

¹ The writers included Masizi Kunene, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba.

² The missionary presses that were available at the time encouraged black writers to write in their indigenous languages, and to concentrate on religious themes.

³ The formal interview took place at noon on 12 November 1992, and it lasted for an hour. Before this interview, Tlali and I engaged in long and lively discussions about herself as a writer. What I have on audiotape is only what transpired during the formal interview.

⁴ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues," Changing Our Own Words, ed. Cheryl Wall (New York: Rutgers: State U, 1989) 17.

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought (Boston: Hyman, 1990) 11.

⁶ Perskor was the only publishing house that accepted manuscripts by black writers. However, the restrictions it placed on the writers' style and content reflected the government's censorship.

⁷ Bessie Head, letter to Randolph Vigne, 27 October 1965, A Gesture of Belonging, ed. Randolph Vigne (London: Heineman, 1991) 9.

⁸ Collins, 27.

⁹ Miriam Tlali, NELM Interview Series, (Grahamstown: National English Literary Museum, 1989) 71.

¹⁰ Tlali will be coming to Vancouver to attend the 1994 International Conference on Narrative Literature from April 28 - May 1. The theme of the conference is "Nativity and Narrativity: Multicultural Framework of Literature."

¹¹ Ezekiel Mphahlele, English in Africa 6. 2 (1979) 3.

Chapter 4

The South African Literary Reception to Tlali's Fiction

Literary censorship demonstrates its latent power in the cultural and intellectual paralysis of its proponents, and it has inadvertently created the privileging of discursive models of expression and appreciation by the "noncanonical" or marginalized writers and critics. The South African literary academy operates in a state of singularity, with only a few privileged voices advocating plurality. Its marginalization of Tlali's fiction necessitates the construction of a critical model cognizant of Tlali's disposition as a black South African female Marxist feminist writer. Her commitment to the culture of liberation informs not only her choice of themes, but her narrative voice as well as her narrative structure. Tlali de-centers the privilege of creative writing and criticism from academic exclusivity, and challenges her critics to decode her counter-hegemonic discourse and structure competently. She also illustrates that because of the text's inherent centrifugality, it cannot be one-voiced, and by extension, it demands multiple voices in deciphering it. Implicit in her challenge is her protest against what Terry Eagleton refers to as "literary league-tabling" which is aimed at the enshrinement of Literature itself as reified value.¹ The reification of canonical literature through its enshrinement venerates its hegemonic values in the South African literary academy, and ignores, or at best, silences and marginalizes opposing voices from emerging. In an editorial introduction to Rendering Things Visible, Martin Trump remarks that "Tertiary-level literature teaching and criticism is, like most sites of power in South Africa, by and large a white preserve".² Unprivileged voices that ultimately force their vibrations on the consciousness of the dominant literary academy are in turn totally polarized by the academy, and are consequently labelled as "unnatural," "illogical," "irrational," and "unmannerly," as Rory Ryan notes in his essay, "Literary-

Intellectual Behaviour in South Africa."³ The status quo is maintained by the legitimacy awarded by publishers, journalists, reviewers, librarians, and academicians in their monopolization of the production of literature. Tlali's fiction falls within the category of the "un" because of its thematic, structural and contextual non-affinity to the demands of the dominant white ideology. She approaches literature from a populist perspective, as opposed to an elitist perspective, and advances its objectives through its aesthetic utilitarianism that appeals to the esoteric few, yet remains accessible to the masses. Her novelistic discourse verifies Mikhail Bakhtin's impression of the novel as a "phenomenon multiform in style, and variform in speech and voice."⁴ By the same token, Tlali's fiction demands heterogeneous critical approaches to "read" its multiple and polycentric spheres, rather than be terrorized by the tyranny of the dominant literature and criticism. Eagleton says of the tyranny of literature that it always prevents the reader from deciphering the signs, and makes it difficult for her/him to be perceptive. Yet literature is supposed to release the reader from her/his ignorance, and also make her/him aware of its inherent contradictions of accessibility and esotericism.⁵ Ignorance is usually the product of a privileged mind which, by necessity, fails to recognize the validity of opposing voices.

My concern in this chapter is to comment on the causes and effects of the South African literary practice of elitist aesthetic criticism, which, in the case of Tlali, has contributed to her double censorship. In tracing the development of literary criticism, Raymond Williams notes that the idea of criticism itself is bourgeois and elitist. Criticism can be equated with "taste" or "sensibility," all of which are grounded in class consciousness.⁶ Literature is literature is literature, and therefore, cannot be reduced to a set of linear projections that are exclusivist and irrelevant. Aesthetic exclusivists should realize that each creative writer approaches her work with an aesthetic ideology and a social vision which are not necessarily exclusivist. In the case

of Tlali, that aesthetic ideology comes in the form of Marxist feminism because of her proletarian commitment to political and social justice in South Africa. As a hybrid literary theory, Marxist feminism does not exclude other theories, but seeks to embrace them in a quest for the development of a utilitarian literary theory that will not privilege the continued hegemony of one culture's values over another. Marxist feminism has also made significant advancements in the identification and description of the political unconscious of the text through the examination of language and formalistic convention. Through her writing, Tlali expresses her social vision which she encapsulates by enabling the reader to participate in an exploration of that vision through her artistic form. Her literary form cannot be tabled as "traditional" as in following the colonial consensual hegemony of what literature should be, or "reactionary," as in functioning in direct opposition to all that the traditional school stands for. Her heritage of colonial mentality towards her choice and identification of genres gives way to an alternative form of expression and foregrounding techniques as evident in her categorization of her writing in Mihloti. An unprecedented meeting with the police and Tlali's consequent detention constitute what she refers to as "New Journalism," a phrase that suggests her impression of journalism, especially in a country that is highly selective of the information that it disseminates to the public. Tlali makes an incisive commentary on the nature of discriminatory mainstream journalism in the country by intentionally highlighting police brutality on innocent mourners in her story. She also includes an ordinary trip to a resort under the title of "Travelogues," and makes it stand parallel to her overseas trips. That approximation cannot be lost to us because of Tlali's intention of bringing out the poignancy of racial segregation in South Africa. Her allusion to the fact that her trip to the resort involved crossing imaginary borders between South Africa and Bophutatswana, sensitizes us to the debilitating psychological borders that people are forced to cross in South Africa.

In Art and Ideology in the African Novel, Emmanuel Ngara identifies three categories of ideology, namely: the dominant ideology or ideologies, authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology.⁷ Although Ngara does not present any specialized analyses of these ideologies, he does provide working definitions for the reader. Tlali's authorial and aesthetic ideologies work at counter-point to the dominant ideology which is informed by the aggressiveness of its proponents through their institutionalization of hegemonized cultural and intellectual closure through censorship. She demonstrates that the emergence of "new" or "nontraditional" writing, i.e. writing which is alienated from the principles of the dominant ideology, should not be stifled by being measured according to the values of the dominant ideology. The criteria of the dominant ideology's aesthetics become totally incompatible with nontraditional writing, especially when critics fail to recognize the dynamics involved in nontraditional writings. The problem is even more accentuated in South Africa, where the nontraditional writers are psychologically and culturally distanced from traditional writers and critics because of the policy of racial segregation, which does not encourage healthy relations among different races. Tlali's revolutionary fiction questions the South African literary system of elitism in aesthetics, and exposes its deficiencies and irrelevance.

The canonization of white English literature in South Africa has, in principle, obliterated from its consciousness the presence of non-white literature even when written in English. Hence the entrenched privileging of white literature and criticism throughout the decades, despite attempts by "zealous white humanist university teachers" to assemble a representative South African "canon."⁸ In the case of South Africa, the privileged, without exception, refers to whites, and the unprivileged refers to blacks. All these factors have consistently demonstrated a direct correlation between the curriculum designs and political perspectives of the entire education system. Since

the introduction of the Bantu Education Act in 1953, black students have been fed with an educational diet deficient in positive and influential cultural and intellectual black role models, and this has had a deleterious effect on their confidence in matters academic, and in their dealings with other races, whose school systems have arguably, exposed them to positive role models. The psychological purpose of Bantu Education was to program black students into a nation of subservients, always at the mercy of white hegemonic values.⁹

Although Bantu Education has received vigorous rejections from concerned black parents and academics and a host of white liberals since its inception, its very core of racial and cultural hegemony has remained entrenched. Today's lists of prescribed texts in black university English departments and high schools attest to the legacy of the system's intent. The insufficient representation of black South African female writers in English courses is one example of the continued cultural hegemony of white values over black, and also of male values over female. One practical consequence of such an omission becomes evident in the assumption by most black students that despite the odds, black South Africa has not produced any female writers at all. To a student who has had the good fortune of having come into contact with any amount of fiction by black South African women, such an omission implies an unworthiness of this corpus of literature to claim a space in the hallowed English literature.

Closely related to the curriculum hegemony experienced in the academic field is the lack of understanding by English professors and critics of the cultural influences which affect most black female writers. In most cases, black female writers do not come equipped with the tools necessary to make them "fine literary persons" or "accomplished writers" because such tools are, almost exclusively, attainable from academic institutions, from which black women writers are largely excluded. They

write as a matter of fact, expressing their knowledge which is based on their reflections of their socio-political experiences that define their status as black women writers, and address their own people about issues that are dear to them, and in most cases, seeking no publicity. Either by accident or design, their writings are largely autobiographical, whereby they legitimate their voices and presence in ways that they were never defined before. These writers emerge from various cultural backgrounds and influences which have learned to exclude or suppress the heroic images of their womenfolk. Because they are so oppressed not just as writers, but first as black women, every aspect of their fight is for freedom, and teaching and writing about themselves is a necessary step towards attaining that goal.¹⁰ Therefore, their works are about themselves and their concern with other women around them. Tlali writes within this "tradition," whereby all her characters' thoughts and actions are dispensed from black female concern, either covertly or openly. The autobiographical nature of her fiction constitutes her social realism, and her appeal to justice in South Africa. At no point does she advocate hostility towards the hegemonic culture because of her understanding of its reactionary residues that are harmful to the progress of the struggle. Instead, she demonstrates a mature assessment of the South African situation which is in desperate need of redressing.

Feminist critics would do well to recognize the South African black women's relations to power and discourse in their analyses of Tlali's fiction. Her presentation of female characters does not satisfy the principles of feminist discourse as practiced in Western novels, but advances a woman-centered discourse that is grounded in the African world view of communality. The African woman's awareness of her basic power makes her a passive activist in the eyes of Western feminists.

If Tlali's fiction is not Literature, then it certainly is text, and there ought to be a way to decipher any text if we claim to be literate at all. Tlali approaches us through a textually mediated discourse which is hegemonized by an unfamiliar culture.

Notes

- ¹ Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (London: NLB, 1986) 165.
- ² Martin Trump, ed. Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1990) xiii.
- ³ Rory Ryan, "Literary-Intellectual Behaviour in South Africa," Rendering Things Visible, ed. Martin Trump, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1990) 7.
- ⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination Michael Holquist, ed. (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 261.
- ⁵ Eagleton, 165.
- ⁶ Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: UP, 1977) 48.
- ⁷ Emmanuel Ngara, Art and Ideology in the African Novel (London: Heinemann, 1985) 108.
- ⁸ Rory Ryan, op. cit.

⁹ The South African political policy of racial segregation is parallel to the American system. bell hooks has made similar observations in the American higher academy, and the similarities between the two countries are shockingly prominent.

¹⁰ Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. But Some of Us Are Brave (New York: Feminist Press, 1982) xxi.

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APPENDIX

This interview took place at Tlali's home in Leribe, Lesotho, on Wednesday, 12 November 1992 at 12 noon. Although her son was in our company, the interview was focused on Tlali only.

Would you give me a short profile of your writing career, like, when did you start writing, and what motivated you to write?

I started writing in the early sixties, and I was prompted by the political situation that affected me as a black person in South Africa. However, I did not have enough time to concentrate on it, and before I could start thinking seriously about it, I was detained at Robben Island. When I left the Island in 1962, I went back to Jo'burg. The general mood was most uncertain. There was no political activity going on, and within a few months, the Rivonia Treason Trial was held. But I became really restless because there seemed to be no prospects for black people. After the trial, the leaders were jailed, the memories of Sharpeville and Langa continued to linger on people's minds, some leaders died, many others left the country, the political movements were banned, and then people refrained from discussing politics openly, because fear was instilled in them by the government and its machinations. The whole situation became depressing, and I felt even more depressed because I was always involved in political activities from the time I was a student in Sophiatown and Western Native Township as well. I became frustrated, and something in me urged me to start writing. Then, when I started working at a furniture store, and I studied the faces of black people coming into the store to buy and pay their accounts, I saw the forced silence and humility with which they carried their lives. I became even more restless. I felt pressurised to do

something about the uneasy quiet that had taken over. You could see the anger of the people boiling underneath as they were forced to remain quiet. But I was not going to be quiet, and I thought it the time to start writing. I realised that I had to write about the situation as it was, and give my manuscript to anybody who would be willing to publish it. I had to get all the frustration out. And it was only after I had started writing that I experienced the most peaceful moments of my life, even though my circumstances were difficult. I was nursing my terminally ill mother at the time, and I was out of work and I couldn't get another job because of my qualifications. My life was generally at a low ebb. I would have sure landed in a mental asylum had I not sat down to write then. The pressure was just unbearable, and writing brought me a great deal of relief, and released some of the anger that was in me ...

So, it was basically your social and political situations that actually motivated you to write.

Yes, yes, I mean, the uneasy quiet really made me restless. It was unnaturally quiet, we couldn't hold political meetings, we couldn't speak about any political activities or so on, we couldn't object to any of the very very unpleasant policies of the apartheid system, and that made me really mad.

Is that why you chose to come to Roma University here in Lesotho rather than go to a university in South Africa?

No, I actually came to Roma after Wits.

But you did not finish at Wits.

You know, I actually gate-crashed into Wits, because I did not have the money to pay the fees, I didn't have a scholarship. The scholarship I had was to go and study Medicine at Roma, not Wits, and it came from the City Council of Johannesburg ...

When was that? Which year?

Oh, in 1958, just before the universities were closed to black people. But then, the crunch was that I could still not enter Medical School because at that time they were taking only two or three black students, and again, preference was given to students who came from neighbouring protectorates--Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland, but not for Africans from inside South Africa itself. Very few ever got scholarships. But then I was fortunate, because I met a certain gentleman who was working at the Johannesburg City Council at the time, and he helped me get a scholarship. He must have been touched by my persistence, because I had the necessary qualifications. I had my Maths, I had my Physical Science, and General Science, and these were the requirements to enter Medical School. But, it was really at the insistence of my mother, because I knew that my symbols in the sciences were not as good as my symbols in the languages. Yes, but I had the required minimum to enter any Medical School, and my mother saw no reason why I shouldn't. However, at that time, getting into the Wits Medical School as a black person was like a camel going through a needle's eye. Very few black people could do that. It was regarded as a privilege, as if we did not qualify for that. They kept on saying to me: "wait till next year," "wait till next year," until it was almost too late. If I hadn't gone in in 1959, I would have been locked out, and so, I decided to register for an Arts degree and apply for Medicine from within. I did that, but before I got to second year, my mother was advised that the best option would be for me to come to Roma University here, where I could take a BSc degree. In Lesotho, I would get a chance to do Pre-Med. You know

how they used to waste black people's time by first sending us to Pre-Med before we could register for an MB.ChB degree. They just wasted our time. I did not see it as necessary at all. But that was the procedure then, and my mother sent me here. By that time I had my son already, and things were very difficult. The expenses involved in travelling to Roma, the fees, and everything put a lot of financial strain on us. In Johannesburg, when I entered Wits without a cent in my pocket to pay for my fees or books or other expenses, at least once I was inside, after I had got admission, I could apply for a scholarship, and I did get it because I was from South Africa. I got it through the Institute of Race Relations, and it paid my fees, but in Lesotho, it was a different matter. I was called for an interview because I had also applied for a scholarship on the basis that although I was from South Africa, my grand parents and great-grand parents were originally from Lesotho, and they were tax-payers in Lesotho. Both my mother's people and my father's people came from Lesotho, so, on that basis, my mother argued that I should be able to get a scholarship even from the Lesotho Government. So, I went for an interview with other people, but the snag was said to be that "whilst you qualify as a Mosotho to get a scholarship from the Lesotho government, you do not qualify on the basis that you are married in the Republic of South Africa," and married to a Motswana for that matter. They just gave an excuse, so I couldn't qualify, and things were so difficult even to get him [pointing to her son] into school here because my mother was in the priesthood ...

Your mother?

My father, my stepfather. My father died when I was still young. It then became very clear that I was going to have it very tough because it only meant that my husband should work and support his father, his mother, me, him, and even send me to school and pay the fees--in fact, I paid part of the fees when I was already working in

Johannesburg--he had left a big account, because I couldn't get a scholarship, but my mother said: "you've got to go back to school." The whole thing was, you know, real hardship, and it was doomed to fail. So, I went back to Johannesburg after my first year, it wasn't possible for me to continue, and then, eh, as I said, we had an account to pay and so on, and it had not been paid, so, it was obvious that I would have to find employment and help my husband, because at that time, his father was very old, and his mother was terminally ill, so I just had to chip in and help. Fortunately, I got employed at this shop where I got the idea of using the scene right there before my eyes to describe the plight of Africans, especially in the work situation. [Pause] It was just a matter of fighting, that's all.

So, that was the end of your medical career.

That was the end of my medical career. I wasn't really sorry about that. I was sorry for my mother because she felt so strongly about it. Her husband died when I was an infant. He was a teacher, and she had assured him that she would send us to school, and that is why she sat on my husband's neck that "she's got to go back." I had his (meaning her son) younger sister also, and I left them, went back to school, and my mother looked after them. My mother said to my husband: "*Le mo nyetse a le monyane la re le tla mo isa sekolong. Joale ga le mo ise.*" When they gave the excuse of the children she said: "*Let them come to me, ke tla sala le bona.*" That's what happened. It was really because of my mother's insistence. But, as for medicine and what I am now, I always knew that I could make a place for myself academically in the languages because I had very good command of the languages, and I always got very good symbols, distinctions and so on. So, I knew I would make it if I was given the opportunity to go back. However, I had not sat down and said to myself that I wanted to be a writer. The pressure to do that came as a result of the oppression that I felt,

and I had no better tool to use against it myself. My writing became the sword to fight the enemy with, and it was the best I had. And I'm not sorry for that. There are people who wrote theses about my life, comparing it to the life of Olive Schreiner who left South Africa with the intention of studying medicine, but couldn't. She always carried a manuscript in her bag. Ultimately, she became a writer and not a medical doctor. So, I am not sorry.

You're not sorry ...

No, I'm not.

No, you shouldn't be sorry, because really, in as far as I'm concerned, you have really achieved a great deal. Now, can we concentrate more on your writing itself, especially where it concerns your choice of genres in different works. What are the factors that contribute to your preference for a particular genre that you adopt in your writing? For example, why did you choose a novel for Amandla instead of a play, a short story, or even an epic poem?

You know, I studied English only up to Matric. I did not study writing as such, and, I was still trying my hand at different genres at that time. I did not feel very comfortable with other genres other than the novel, because I always thought that I would have to have correct training for that. But with simple narrative and expanding ideas--I thought I could tackle that, because I always wrote good compositions that were always read to my class mates in school. So, I felt I had more control over that medium than any other.

So the novel was some kind of an automatic or natural extension of your essays or compositions that you wrote at school. Okay ...

Yes, and of course, I always read a lot. I read anything that I could lay my hands on, and so novel writing was more easier to tackle than say poetry.

So far, you have produced, rather published two novels--Muriel at Metropolitan and Amandla, and you have also published Soweto Stories and Mihloti, and the play which you wrote and produced in Holland, Crimen Injuria ...

There is another play that I wrote called Khodumodumo. This one, eh, you know what *khodumodumo* is?

No, I don't ...

It is from the fairy tale in Sesotho--the big animal, the dinosaur-like creature which swallows people alive. That was my first attempt at play writing. However, I couldn't publish the play because of the politics involved then. The play was written in Sesotho because I couldn't see how I could write it in English. But then, my beliefs as a black writer in South Africa that if I were to publish anything in my mother tongue, the likelihood would be that it would be read mainly by Sotho speaking people, and those who were not Sotho speaking wouldn't have access to it created some obstructions, which, I must add, were themselves created by the apartheid system. Because of the government's tactics of divide and rule, I would have been easily categorized as "another Mosotho writer" had I gone on to publish the play. I belonged to an association of African writers at the time, and those of us who wrote protest literature especially, vowed that we would never divide ourselves like the system had already

divided us into tribal groups. We were always opposed to that. So, if I had published the play, I would have been immediately declared a tribal writer. And I knew the publishers like the Afrikaans Perskor for instance, were the only ones willing to take books as long as they were written in the vernacular, you know, in keeping with the system of separate development. It was a little problematic considering other factors, and I refrained from publishing it. I said that I would only publish it on condition that, first, it wouldn't jeopardize my chances as a writer, and secondly, it would be translated into other African languages like Zulu and Tswana as soon as it appeared.

So, you were going to make translations?

Yes, but nobody could translate it. I took the trouble to get people to do that, but they had problems doing that. Some of the ideas were easy to translate, but such scenes which involve the traditional African medicine man who speaks to his bones were simply impossible to translate.

When was this play written?

In 1978.

In our conversation yesterday you mentioned that your anthology of short stories was published by a new title. Your original title was rejected by the publishers, as was the case with Muriel at Metropolitan. What happened?

Oh, you mean Footprints. I had given it an African title, with the aim that one day, when things were different, I would rewrite the short stories in Sesotho, because that's the language I'm most comfortable with. That is why "*ke ile ka e bitsa Mehlala*"

Khatamping. " *Khatampi* is a cesspool, and looking at the South African situation and the way black people were treated, and how the Boers sunk in morality and thought even lower than we thought they were capable, I couldn't think of any other imagery than that! [Laugh]

But it wasn't published by that title.

No, but I still call it Footprints. It was the London publishers, Pandora Press, who suggested that I should use "Soweto" somewhere--to make it sell well, you know.

What about Muriel at Metropolitan? Was that your original title?

No, I had called it Between Two Worlds, but the publishers refused to take that title, and there was very little I could do. I would still prefer to have subsequent editions published in their original titles. For example, David Philip in Cape Town has done that already with Footprints.

What does being a black woman writer in South Africa today mean? I can imagine that you have had a number of run-ins with the police, as you have already alluded to your incarceration at Robben Island earlier.

You know, my writing career has been clouded with police' shadows. They prevented me from writing through their visits. They used to come to my house quite regularly, ransack the house, take me to John Vorster Square to question me, and when I tried to escape to Lesotho to find peace of mind, they would tell my husband that I should report at Protea Police station as soon as I came back home. They always wanted to know where I was. So, you can imagine the threat under which I lived. I always feared for my life, and it was hard to tell when the police would call again, or worse

still, what they would do next? Therefore I had to hide my manuscripts, sometimes by burying them in my yard in Soweto. *Ke ne ke di tsetela mo fatshe, Oh!*

It must have been hard ...

Very hard. Even now, I still feel as if a part of me lies buried with those manuscripts and books, and another part of me survives above the ground. I feel so unwholesome, so torn apart, as if I am trying to live two lives at the same time. The whole thing is strenuous. It drains me of all strength. [Silence]

I can imagine ... So, is that why your writing is autobiographical?

Well, not all of them. Muriel at Metropolitan yes, to a certain extent, even though I wasn't writing about myself as such. I was writing about the work situation--what I was experiencing at work, and I did not write about my life at home, my family, and that was something I could write a whole new novel about. I wanted to reflect on what happened to us as workers. So, I removed my attention from my personal life, and concentrated on the wider society. That way, I felt I could get a better understanding of my situation as a black woman in South Africa.

You know, as I was trying to find more information on your works, I came across critics who view your work as only political, and devoid of any aestheticism. What's your response to that?

Well, I can say that they are shortsighted for one thing, because my works are both political and aesthetic. In any case, any form of writing is aesthetic. Look at the short stories, look at Amandla, for example. I wasn't writing about myself, I was writing

about characters which I created. And of course, everything about South Africa is political.

In fact, I didn't agree with those critics, because in as far as I'm concerned, you were experimenting with a different kind of writing in that novel because you successfully create a situation that is highly volatile and chaotic, and that is why the novel seems to lack coherence. However, the reader is still able to understand what is going on at the end. So, I really do not agree with these critics who see your work as just political. Maybe it's because they compare your works with others which do not assume the position that you do. I must say that Amandla is a successful novel given its milieu. I believe that we have to start looking at our own situation, our own reality, and refrain from suppressing our feelings and ideas. We have done that for long, and it is time we confronted our situation realistically. Oops! I'm supposed to be conducting the interview, and not the other way round. [Laugh] Now, apart from that, I think that you have earned yourself a space in the South African literary field. What's your own assessment of your position?

I believe that I could have done far more than this had my books not been banned as soon as they appeared. I'm quite convinced that Muriel at Metropolitan would have been an instant best-seller had it been freely circulated in South Africa. Look at Amandla. People continued to search for it long after it was banned. I was touched by the support that black people gave me, especially when one considers the financial hardships that we live through. People just wanted to get the novel and read it. It is about them after all, and for once they could see their lives positively reflected in books. What the government did was unpardonable. If they didn't like it why throttle it, eh? Why bother with it? At any rate, their efforts achieved opposite results because more and more people continue to read my works and that gives me hope. Despite all

that, I'm far from being satisfied about the amount of work I have been able to publish. I used to do a lot of writing when I was on tours, and the last time I really did something was when I was on my visit to Yale. Since then, I haven't created anything. I have this novel that has been on my mind for almost two years now. I need to do something about it. I'm really not happy with my progress. I also don't read as much as I would like to, and that's because I have to give priority to domestic issues that spring up and demand my attention. However, I'm hoping that soon I'll be in a position to do what I want to do. I want to go out and interview a lot of women inside South Africa. I'm particularly interested in women in the rural areas. I hope that the position of black women throughout the country will improve, judging by the developments in Codesa, despite these many problems. Women are beginning to speak up again, and I think that it is very important, and I don't want to miss out on that. If I could find more time now, I would sure get started immediately. I really want to address certain spheres of black women's development that I think hadn't been fully addressed. I've been watching their development very closely, and I am aware of the changes that have taken place, and those that should take place when our position gets better and better.

So, you do write non-fiction as well.

Yes, I do get regular requests to write articles for magazines. As a matter of fact, I was asked to contribute to a new magazine some friends of mine are putting together in the United States, and I'm still waiting for more information from them.

I understand that your novels have been published in several languages.

Yes, between them, Amandla and Muriel at Metropolitan have been translated into French, German, Dutch, Polish, Danish and even Japanese. I thought I had some copies of these translations here, but I cannot find them. They must be in Soweto.

How about the issues of Feminism and Womanism? I would like to get your opinions on them, given their relative unfamiliarity among black women in South Africa. But first, would you consider yourself a feminist or a womanist or both?

Well, I am both a feminist and a womanist, and of course, there are as many feminisms and womanisms as there are women in the world. It depends on what you really mean by those concepts. Almost every woman that I met in Amsterdam last July during the Fourth Feminist International Book Fair had her own definitions of what feminism and womanism are. It was actually confusing, but one thing for sure, it emphasized the point that feminism and womanism cannot be understood in the same way world wide. For black women at home, the concepts of feminism and womanisms still need to be clarified because most of them view feminism as a "white thing" or an "overseas thing." However, I would define a feminist as a woman who values her independence, is responsible, has concern for others, and fights for the realization of women's independence. Both my mother and grandmother were feminists in their own rights. I even look at you as one. There are really no hard and fast rules about these definitions, as long as we understand that a feminist is one who acts in the interest of women.

How about cultural constraints?

Well, when you consider the fact that our African societies were matriarchal, and that you can still see a lot of traces of that in some tribal groups, the issue of the present and immediate past cultural constraints is an unfortunate one. Some of these

constraints which promote female oppression came with other racial groups who frowned on our traditional political systems. Even today, old people can relate how African societies used to be organized before European subjugation.

In conclusion, I will ask you to read from Muriel at Metropolitan so as to give us a sense of Muriel's feelings when she was still employed at Metropolitan.

[Tlali read from pages 188-189 of the novel]

Do you feel any anger and hatred towards apartheid, especially at the way Muriel was treated?

Yes, I do feel angry, but I harbour no hatred in me. It is self-consuming, and I think I am above that feeling.

Well, that concludes our interview, and thank you very much for your time. I'll be on the look-out for your latest books on the shelves.

Mmm! I'm flattered. Thanks for your time too. I really enjoyed speaking to you.
