

Makhosazana Xaba

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Tribute

Noni Jabavu: a peripatetic writer ahead of her times

When Noni Jabavu died in June last year, I had just talked about her biography a few days earlier at the Cape Town International Book Fair. I was the only person on that four-person panel whose biography was still 'work-in-progress'. Her death brought that progress to a pause. It numbed me to inaction in ways I had not expected. I realized then that my emotional connection to her was much stronger than I had acknowledged to myself. Although I had spoken to her only once, for no longer than 5 minutes in 2005, I had carried the story of her life with me for much too long. As I continue to unearth and piece it together I grow in my belief that she was a woman who lived way ahead of her times.

When Noni left South Africa in 1933 she did not even know what she wanted to become. Commenting on her departure in 1933 she wrote:

A house called Tsalta, at Claremont, Cape, was where I first beheld and shook hands with the English couple who were to be my guardians in England. That house was where General and Mrs. Smuts lived. Its name was backwards for "At last".

Like a typical black child of those days, at 13 I was not too well primed about the negotiations that must have gone on between my parents and my prospective loco-parents, about the life they were planning for me which I was to learn in years to come, was to be a practical demonstration of the generations of friendship between families. I learned then that the plan was for me to be trained as a doctor to serve my people. But it misfired, for a medical doctor was the one thing I didn't want to be. I didn't know what I wanted to be. (Jabavu 1977: 8)

She became, the first Black South African woman to publish a book *Drawn in Colour* (John Murray) in London in 1960. This was hot on the heels of her contemporaries Peter Abrahams (*Tell Freedom*, 1954) and Ezekiel Mphahlele (*Down Second Avenue*, 1959) whose autobiographical works had also been published in Britain. Interestingly, all three were born in 1919 and Mphahlele and Noni died in the same year, 2008.

Abrahams has been living in Jamaica for over 50 years. When I spoke to Abrahams on the phone while in Jamaica in 2007, his response was brief: yes he knew Noni while he lived in Britain; yes he met her a few times; but no they were not friends; and, she was a 'Black Briton'. Further probing revealed he had read her books, and preferred not to comment on them. Additional probing brought silence.

Within the first year of its publication *Drawn in Colour* was reprinted five times. By 1961 the book had been translated into Italian and published in Milan under the title *Il colore della pelle*. In 1962 St Martin's Press in New York followed suit. When John Murray published Noni's sequel *The Ochre People* in 1963, St Martin's Press soon followed with an American edition. Such phenomenal publishing success put Noni way ahead of other women in the country of her birth. Notably, this was also at a time ahead of the rise of feminist and women-only publishing in Britain. It took 20 years for her second book to be published in South Africa, by Raven Press.

In 1961 Noni became, the first woman and Black person to be an editor of a literary magazine, *The New Strand*, which was being revived after its 1950 closure, then called *The Strand*. No doubt the success of her first book would have brought her to the limelight and thus she became a suitable candidate for this job. She was however, slightly conflicted by her role. Having chosen to be a writer and enjoyed it, editing was a different animal, one that she sometimes admitted not knowing just how to take care of. As an editor she commuted, worked from home, travelled the world, wrote from ships, in hotel rooms, in friends' homes (Robert Graves' home in Mollarco being one from which she often wrote) and on beaches. She began her February 1962 editorial thus: "Jamaica in January; midwinter in Menton, next April in Alexandria. My travel diary seems bent on onomatopoeia, alliteration. Or is it bending that way because my mother tongue is an alliterative language?" (Jabavu 1962a: 196) and a month later she wrote: "The month of March makes a halt in my current life of travel – the peripatetic print of my feet." (Jabavu 1962b: 323) April was the eighth and last month at her job. Although her editorship with *The New Strand* was short lived, her pioneering presence lives on.

In 1977 Noni became a weekly columnist for the newspaper, *Daily Dispatch*, under the editorship of Donald Woods – a position he had held since 1965. She was living in Kenya and had come to South Africa to spend a year doing research towards a biography of her father. As a British passport holder and because of immigration laws of the homelands (Ciskei, Transkei) and those of South Africa, she could only stay continuously in one country/homeland for three months. And so she moved, and wrote, and returned to Kenya for short visits, and talked to numerous people about her father, and wrote. By the end of the year, Noni was a household name: her readers' letter box was overflowing and her 3 months fellowship at Rhodes University had caught the curiosity, imagination and interest of many.

When Noni went to live in Zimbabwe in 1980 she continued to write – mostly

opinion pieces for newspapers but with much less frequency. Notably, in all her life, and as early as the early 1940s – when her writing was yet to be consistent and recognized – Noni did two things most consistently: she travelled and she wrote. She wrote most of *Drawn in Colour* while in Uganda and she wrote most of *The Ochre People* from Jamaica; on both occasions she frequently travelled to London to work with her editor. She chose to write and travel chose her: my words, drawn from the manner in which she speaks about both.

Born on 20 August 1919 in Alice, Nontando (Noni) Helen daughter to Thandiswa Florence Makiwane and D. D. T. Jabavu, she became a woman of words, a woman of the world. And, to many, who could not find a suitable box to fit her in, she became a woman of wonder.

Works cited

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