

Thengani H. Ngwenya

Thengani H. Ngwenya is an Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Durban University of Technology. Email: ngwenyat@dut.ac.za

Tribute

**Mafika Pascal Gwala (1947–2014)
The poet-activist and the mirage of freedom**

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Mafika Pascal Gwala who passed away in September at the age of sixty seven (67) will be remembered as a straight-talking and often cantankerous South African poet who made a notable contribution to South African English poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Born in Verulam in 1946, Gwala started writing in 1966 and his first poems and short stories appeared in the *Classic*, *New Nation*, *Realities* and *Ophir*. He edited the *Black Review* in 1973 and published essays in several books and magazines. Literary critics who have

written on Gwala's work as a poet, critic and social commentator have noted the ways in which his poetry was informed by the turbulent political climate of his time. His first collection of poems, *Jol'iinkomo* came out in 1977 the year in which Stephen Bantu Biko, Gwala's close comrade in the Black Consciousness movement, was murdered by the police in a Pretoria prison cell. 1982 saw the publication of his second volume of poetry titled *No More Lullabies*. In 1991 he co-edited, with the acclaimed scholar of African oral literature Liz Gunner, a collection of praise poems titled *Musho!: Zulu Popular Praises*.

In South African literary circles Gwala is often associated with Mongane Serote, Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Sipho Sepamla all whom have been given the label of Black Consciousness poets by literary critics. Michael Chapman, the pre-eminent scholar of South African literature has compiled an invaluable record of essays, reviews and reviews on the work of Gwala and his contemporaries in his book *Soweto Poetry* (1982). Although there were notable differences among them, they all shared the distinction of being creative spokespersons of the millions of disenfranchised South African citizens. In an essay published in 1984 Gwala made it clear that he regarded his "writing as a cultural weapon" to be used to fight social and political injustice. As he points out in his essay on Biko which appeared Mothobi Mutloatse's *Reconstruction: 90 Years of Historical Literature* (1981), Gwala worked closely with Steve Biko and other Black Consciousness intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s. It would, however, be simplistic to pigeonhole Gwala as a Black Consciousness activist as he was very much aware that Black Consciousness was a phenomenon of its time and that there were

other political ideologies worth exploring. His vision of a truly humane and egalitarian society may be loosely characterized as being socialist in orientation. His reading of the work of Karl Marx turned him into a life-long historical materialist who, until his death, was very sceptical of the system of market capitalism, which inevitably promotes greed, corruption and widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Both of his poetry collections contain poems that are very critical of what he considered to be the misguided pretensions and aspirations of the black middle class of his time. He mockingly refers to the emergent black middle class as “black status seekers” in a poem of that title in *Jol’iinkomo*.

Regrettably, during the first two decades of freedom in South Africa Gwala, who was obviously disgruntled and disillusioned, stopped writing poetry and disappeared from the literary scene spending most of his time in local *shebeens* and taverns in the township of Mpumalanga near Hammersdale.

It is evident from his critical essays and speeches that Gwala was a voracious reader who read African as well as European and American writers. Like the Afro-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance with whose work he was thoroughly familiar, Gwala chose to confront social injustice head-on offering trenchant and unapologetic responses to critics who questioned the literary merit of his poetry. He made it abundantly clear to the white liberal establishment that dominated Literary Studies at the time that he was not prepared to conform to the demands of literariness as defined by university professors. In his poem titled “In Defence of Poetry”, a poem generally regarded by critics as providing the manifesto of politically committed poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, Gwala gives the rationale for his apparently “unpoetic” approach to poetry. In this poem the speaker raises questions about the patently violent and repressive tactics of the apartheid regime including deaths in detention, killing of school children and racial oppression. The final stanza provides a direct and unapologetic response to the keepers of poetic standards:

As long as
this land, my country
is unpoetic in its doings
it’ll be poetic to disagree.

Largely because Gwala’s work and that of his contemporaries was a direct response to the socio-political conditions of his time his work will continue to appeal to the discerning literary historians interested in the complex interconnections between history and literature. Gwala is one of the South African poets who, in the words of another prominent South African poet-activist, Jeremy Cronin, have taught us taught “to speak with the voices of this land”. Gwala’s departure leaves a void in the South African literary scene which can only be filled by the youth of a free South Africa made possible, in part, by poets who used writing as a cultural weapon. *Hamba kahle Mphephethwa!*

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