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The Mofolo effect and the substance of Lesotho literature in English

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*Thomas Mofolo is a renowned twentieth century writer who emerged in Lesotho as a product of the spread of missionary education. Written in Sesotho, his works have been translated into English over time. Etymologically, the word "effect" in the title refers to a phenomenon or an observable fact or occurrence that assumes the effects of a norm. The word has connotations of positive expectation, standard, measure and yardstick in determining the reciprocal influence of between past and present, old and new in Basotho imaginative production. This article sets out to determine the impact of Thomas Mofolo's role as a precursor to, or predecessor of Lesotho literature in general. The idea is to measure whether we can speak of a "Mofolo effect" in both the origins and ascendancy of Lesotho literature in English in particular. **Keywords:** Lesotho literature, literary history, Thomas Mofolo.*

Introduction and theoretical underpinning

This article interrogates a number of facets of Lesotho literature in English and Thomas Mofolo's role in it. We are deliberately focusing on literature written in English and not in Sesotho, as the latter has been covered substantially by others (see Swanepoel; Ntuli and Swanepoel), and we find it necessary to stake claims from Lesotho on the English literary map of southern Africa.

Historically, the emergence and evolution of literature in Lesotho has been closely linked to the evangelical mission of the church and the dominance of Sesotho as a sole linguistic vehicle for communication, catechistic instruction and creative imagination. This scenario has meant that, for years, literature written in the vernacular—Sesotho—has tended to take pride of place at the expense of literary writing in English or in any other language. With time, however, translated works and original literature written in English have arisen and developed, though with almost imperceptible gradualism. This article sets out to describe, anatomise and judge (Hoffman 199) Lesotho literature in English since the days of Mofolo. The paper also attempts to define the identity of this literature.

For a systematic discussion of the trajectory of Lesotho Literature in English, Ambrose has divided the literature into categories based on literary expressions or genres such as novels, short stories, poetry and drama. He also defines this literature as creative writing by a person who is a Mosotho or who has a strong connection with Lesotho. In contrast, Shava and Nyawo-Shava view this literature in English as

writing created by Basotho and non-Basotho of whatever skin colour, dealing with a historical and contemporary consciousness anchored in Lesotho and its enclave realities (geographically, Lesotho is totally surrounded by South Africa).

Periodisation and analytical overview of literary works

Most literatures in other African countries are categorised according to yearly time spans, major political-cum-literary events, or generational differences of the writers themselves. For instance, in classifying Zimbabwean literature, Veit-Wild divides it into three generations representing categories for older, middle and younger writers. In South Africa, what Ndebele refers to as the literature of “spectacle” is divisionally determined by yearly time spans and the advent of major politico-literary events. In turn, critics like Nkosi refer to the writings of the 1950s in South African literature as the “Fabulous Decade”; Visser calls the same decade “the Renaissance that Failed” (qtd. in Shava 89). Watts, Shava and Barnett subdivide South African literature by period—colonial conquest and occupation, the Defiance Campaign, the Sharpeville massacre, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Soweto Uprising and the dawn of the new South Africa.

Currently, however, Lesotho Literature in English, unlike Sesotho literature in South Africa (categorised by Maphike) does not seem to have similar periodic categories. This is perhaps because, compared to the literature of Zimbabwe, South Africa and other bigger African countries, Lesotho literature in English has not yet reached a level of output which requires this kind of literary categorisation. Also, there does not seem to be the kind of major protracted political episodes in Lesotho which promote the kind of literary periods spelt out above.

Nevertheless, for purposes of an analytical overview the following working categories of Lesotho’s creative effort have been adopted: “Early Writings”; “Mid-Period Creativity”; and “Contemporary Works”.

Early writings (early 1900s to 1960s)

This category includes pioneering works such as Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1925) and Mopeli-Paulus’s *Blanket Boy’s Moon* (1953). Though these writings are bedevilled by minor shortcomings in translation and having the authorship queried respectively (see Dunton, and Jones), they constitute the beginnings of Lesotho Literature in English by virtue of having been written by Basotho nationals and partially containing material on Lesotho. Mofolo’s seminal work, *Chaka*, can be described as a historical and ethnocentric novel that records the traditional African past, interethnic conflicts for political hegemony, unbridled ambition for power, and other issues.

The critical literary community at large has confirmed Mofolo’s status as a writer. Mofolo is remembered for his attempts for his attempts to recapture the customs and spirit of the African People (*SESA*). Swanepoel describes him as the most important

African writer of the first quarter of the twentieth century who still ranks with African Nobel laureates such as Soyinka, Gordimer and Mahfouz. Kunene has devoted a thought-provoking and edifying book-length analysis of his prose.

In "What is a Classic?" Eliot describes a "classic" as a standard author in any language. He proceeds to use the word as an indication of the greatness or of the permanence and importance of a writer in his or her own field. These literary attributes and others are clearly embodied in Mofolo through the quality of his writings and how they have been received by the critical community. Whether one is discussing Mofolo's historical, transitional and ethnocentric narrative in *Chaka*, the romantic pastoral convention in *Pitseng* or the fabulistic, allegorical pilgrimage in *Traveller to the East*, he remains an important author who is patently a predecessor to succeeding generations of new authors such as Zakes Mda, Njabulo Ndebele, Patrick Bereng and L. F. Rakotswane (The family of Zakes Mda fled to Lesotho during the apartheid years, and later Njabulo Ndebele joined the Basotho community as a young student at the University of Lesotho.)

It is in this context of being a forerunner or precursor to Lesotho literature that this article seeks to determine Mofolo's influence or non-influence on writers who come after him. With Mofolo's early introduction in Western fictional format to sub-Saharan Africa, his affirmation of African identity and his portrayal of Africa at the crossroads between traditionalism and Christianity and indeed Western culture, his work has been influential, especially on West African writers, South African writers and writers in Lesotho. One only has to think of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Plaatje's *Mhudi* and Mopeli-Paulus's *Blanket Boy's Moon* in which Mofolo's journey-as-theme is revitalised. We will return to Mofolo later.

Mopeli-Paulus's novel, published nearly 28 years after *Chaka*, deals with a variety of concerns related to the overriding issue of migration in the Lesotho/South African transnational or border context. The concerns explore problems attendant upon the mining industry and city life such as vulnerability and exploitation of labour, crowded living conditions, homosexuality, tsotsi life and the oppressive nature of a police state. The novel also explores the journey-motif in relation to the protagonist's involvement with issues such as exile and return, ritual/medicine, murder and tradition. It is interesting how Mopeli-Paulus's novel also resembles Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) in the way in which both treat the journey motif, the influence of religion and the rural-urban divide.

It should be noted that the output of this early period was stunted by what we believe to be the paradox of missionary participation in the development of the literature. Though they were proactive in the emergence of literature, the missionaries' insistence on the portrayal of religious themes at the expense of secular literary expression caused interest and inspiration in creativity to dwindle. Hence, a decline in literary production set in, especially in respect of the novel which had developed

in allegorical and realistic forms over the years. To date, this decline has had negative ramifications even on the development of Lesotho literature in English, especially on the novel as a form.

Unlike the above literary period which is dominated by the creativity and artistic talents of the mission-educated elite, the last two phases below represent the imaginative works produced by university-trained and self-made authors. The works explore how Basotho society and culture have been dislocated by modernity. They record a diverse canvas of issues ranging from migration, through the advocacy for topical local and global concerns, to the secularity of life in general.

Mid-period creativity (late 1970s to 1980s)

Under this category, for reasons spelt above and others, the robust fictive creative effort introduced by Mofolo and Mopeli-Paulus disappears and gives way to a novella, one novel, poetry and dramatic texts. With his *I am a Mosotho* and *Echoes of Passion*, Patrick Bereng stands out in this group on the basis of seniority and relative output. In a passionate and nationalistic style, he vividly portrays the attributes of Basotho identity. Drawing on culture, history, nationality, physical and metaphoric landscape, Bereng depicts a veritable portrait of a Mosotho.

Belonging to the same group are: *Expression*, a periodical of creative writing by the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, Zakes Mda's two plays *The Hill*, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* and the novel *She Plays with Darkness*, Mokhoane's play *Teba* and Hoeane's *Let My People Play!* In *Teba* and *The Hill*, the ever present issue of migration in Lesotho literature is examined. Here, the impact of the mining industry on family life, moral probity, retrenchment of labour and the cash nexus is emphasised in a manner that diminishes victimhood and enhances determination, critical consciousness, dignity and self-esteem on the part of migrant characters. Hoeane's *Let My People Play* deals with unequal distribution of wealth and the labour relations on South African apartheid farms. Mda's *She Plays with Darkness* combines the magical world with the real one in the context of culture, politics and other aspects of life. The novel predominantly captures Lesotho at the height of a political crisis with the character of the main brother contaminated by dictatorship and corruption, and the sister embodying the magical and ideal environment of purity, dancing and changelessness.

Contemporary Works (1990s to date)

In this phase, the literary production is dominated by poetry, drama and short stories. The novel has literally vanished. This trend of imaginative output is probably prompted by a poor reading culture incapable of sustaining the rigours and scope of novel production, the apparent simplicity in handling shorter imaginative works in terms of duration, substance and expertise, the lack of publication funds,

absence of credible publishing houses and academic book centres, and the influence of inspirational sources/centres with their peer/vogue/instant-gains thematic appeal.

In their high-school-prescribed-collections of poetry, *African Passion* (Rakotsoane) and Otury's *In the Kingdom in the Sky*, an anthology of English poetry, respectively grapple with contemporary issues. So do several writers and a new crop of spoken word poets. The work of several others have appeared in publications such as *Na le Uena: An Anthology of Creative Writing in Lesotho*, *Basali*, *Campus Voices*, *A Harvest of Eight Basotho Plays*—all dealing with contemporary issues such as the environment, beauty, cultural and political concerns, migration, identity, love, marital infidelity, retrenchment of labour, livestock theft, social status, ritual/medicine murder, the impact of pandemics like HIV and AIDS, funerary, ideological concerns, xenophobia, ethnicity, family, governance, gender, gay life, crime and punishment, exile and return, concealment and revelation, the African Renaissance, Pan-Africanism, and many others.

As in any literary milieu which employs the three literary genres, poetry, drama and short fiction, these writers set out to expand reader horizons by exploring both historical and contemporary issues shaping our human condition. In keeping with one of the prescriptions of the definition of Lesotho literature in English, we have to stress that the writers are not just Basotho nationals, but of expatriate extraction as well. Otury, for instance, is a Ugandan academic teaching at Holy Trinity High School in Quthing. He has recently published two more anthologies of poetry, *Mountains* and *Revival*. For Mda and Ndebele, Lesotho was their adopted country, but, to all intents and purposes, they are South African citizens. In addition to this, there are several edited anthologies by expatriate academics such as Piniel Shava, Chris Dunton, Vongai Nyawo-Shava and others.

In dealing with topical issues, the writers are both inward and outward looking, consciously or unconsciously seeking to connect their own experiences with those of the region, the African continent and indeed the entire world. By doing this, the writers fulfill numerous functions to Basotho, Southern African and world readerships. They educate and inform their people—both old and young—of this generation and also the ones to come. They hold up the mirror to reflect and predict the ills and foibles of their society. They make known to the world the wisdom and philosophy of their people as embedded and expressed through the subtleties and ambiguities of their language, idioms and substance.

But, while there is both local colour and universality in the content of the authors, there does not seem to be much progression in relation to the development of a national literature. There is little or no literary cross-fertilisation or mutual fecundation between periods (Swanepoel). Yet, there has been much external influence on individual authors. Mda is often referred to stylistically as the South African Brecht for his borrowing of dramatic form from epic theatre; much of Mokhoane's *Teba* has

been influenced by Ayi Kwei Armah and Achebe; Hoeane's participatory indigenous theatre appears to have been motivated by Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Grotowski's *Theatre of the Poor*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and wa Mirii's *I will Marry when I Want*. The technical aspects of spoken word poetry have been inspired by the originators of the genre in Nova Scotia, Canada and, closer home, by some of the practitioners of spoken word poetry like Lebo Mashile, Mpho Siluli and Sheila Kala.

As expressed in the introduction, these writings must be viewed as voices forging something like a national literature. Whereas over the years, it has not been quantitatively feasible to talk of Lesotho literature in English, now indigenous literary writings in English by Basotho authors and their expatriate counterparts are visibly blossoming. True enough, there are recurrent thematic issues revolving around labour migrancy and cultural issues, and weaknesses of form, but, judging by the list of sensibilities enumerated above, there are newer and more topical issues that have emerged from these traditional areas of the nation's experience, thereby creating diversity, transcendence and wholeness in the imaginative effort of Lesotho.

There is a need to transcend language barriers by broadening the medium of creativity in Lesotho. Since there is already a distinct and fully established literature in Sesotho, attempts must be made to increase literary output in English and other official languages. Playing an important role in this development is the English Department of the National University of Lesotho (NUL).

In the 1970s, the Department of English at the NUL was in a state of flux, experiencing some kind of academic revolution, revamping the nature, context, content, scope and relevance of its courses. From the period of Pius XII University College (1945) to the end of University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (1974), the English Department had had a distinctively Eurocentric focus towards literary studies. Both required and optional courses were generally structured on the so-called pillars of English literature with little or no African content in the syllabus. With the advent of NUL in the mid-1970s, a group of lecturers in the Department, themselves distinguished creative writers and critics of African literature, spearheaded the transformation of the syllabus from a Eurocentric to an Afrocentric one.

New courses were mounted on numerous African writers from the Maghrib, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa and southern Africa. Yet, it was quite apparent that Lesotho was not authentically integral to this regional literary representation. Due to the shortage of literary output in the country there was no free-standing, fully-fledged course on Lesotho literature as there were in the cases of Zimbabwean literature, Malawian literature and South African literature.

Only one translated text, *Chaka*, written by Thomas Mofolo, was offered in a preliminary course entitled "Introduction to African Literature". In addition to that, Southern African literature, then and perhaps even now, was, to all intents and purposes, erroneously considered as almost synonymous with South African writing.

Recently, although Basotho writers in English have produced a fair amount of material, of some quality, national literature in English itself remains a tenuous concept, devoid of autonomy and distinctiveness, particularly in its appreciation by an outside readership. Despite the independent literary continuity just mentioned above, some critics continue to view the literature as an appendage of other southern African literatures. Stephen Gray (49), a former external examiner in the Department of English at NUL, has made observations bearing out this assertion. He argues that, in his survey, *Southern African Literatures* (1996), Chapman finds no place in his grand scheme for a category of "Literature in Lesotho" or, more precisely for the English-and-Sesotho-language production of the Basotho people and expatriate writers who have joined it. Gray observes that, where Chapman deals with writers unique to Lesotho, like Thomas Mofolo or A. S. Mopeli-Paulus, he simply annexes them into the larger category of "South African literature" in general. Admittedly, though, there is critical talk about the paucity, dearth and limited nature of the literary output in Lesotho (Shava, Mokuku and Radebe), especially in relation to the creative production of other Southern African countries.

Conclusion

Thomas Mofolo established a tradition in literary writing, both in theme and form. But here is the distressing fact: despite the literary momentum and dynamism Mofolo created through his translated classics, Mofolo's effect on the ascendancy of Lesotho literature has been fairly modest. There seems in the later years especially to be a disconnect or dissociation in form and content between the great works of Mofolo and those of contemporary authors. The tradition seems to have lost its effect with the passage of time and the establishment of new modes and techniques in writing.

Currently, contemporary writings appear disparate, solitary, individual and isolated, thereby weakening the literary connection between the past great and the talented contemporary. By this we mean that the novel as an artistic genre has lost its status and has been replaced by drama and poetry, especially spoken word poetry. Drama groups are proliferating across the country, studying international pieces as well as writing and producing their own. However, one misses in much of it the mythological, historical and ideological context of the country.

While these new authors have obviously gained from Mofolo's past, they have altered the tradition in both form and content. Inspired by international trends, contemporary Lesotho literature in English seems to have forgotten its pastoral past and its mythologies, which leaves it feeling at times like fast fashion, fleeting in its themes and styles; for the focus is on the new and the trendy, and not the human condition or a sense of place and transformation as pioneered by Mofolo in his writing. The individualism of the modern-day writer in Lesotho tends to pull away from the Mofolo effect. To all intents and purposes, contemporary writing in

Lesotho could be construed as a facet of the Keatsian “egotistical sublime” with its unceasing emphasis on “I”, the “now”, and the “transient”.

One of the few exceptions is the writer Mzamane Nhlapo, whose *The Beauty of Pain* seems to have a social, historical and political profundity akin to that of Mofolo. Though tiny in scope, the collection of stories is comprehensive enough and sufficiently stylistically inclusive to cover salient issues of Lesotho historiography and literary history, such as the economic impact of the imposition of hut tax (between 1871 and 1881), the outbreak of Rinderpest (in the mid-1890s), the political contentions over governance of the 1960s and early 1970s, the *coup d'état* of 1986, the looting of foreign-owned businesses, the blockade of the Maseru border in 1986, the Manthabiseng Crisis of 1990, the burning of Maseru in 1998, and recurrent social struggles in Basotho domestic lives.

The literary momentum and dynamism established by the first great Basotho writers must in some or other way be recaptured. The disconnection both in form and content between them and younger authors undermines the evolution of a tradition in the literary output. In the absence of such a decisive literary connection between the past great and the talented contemporary within the country, one cannot safely speak of the existence of a literary tradition in Lesotho literature in English.

All the same, Mofolo remains an icon, a predecessor, and a figure of the great past when writers wrote on issues that affect the human race and the world at large, rather than the limited spaces of small families and communities portrayed in latter-day literature. Yet, in its overall exploration of national and transnational historical and contemporary sensibilities, Lesotho literature in English is clearly a corpus of writing which in many other ways empowers us to know ourselves, know others, and which embodies the growth, the ascendancy and the establishment of a distinctive national literary category.

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