

INTERVIEW WITH NJABULO S. NDEBELE
(Recorded in Roma on 19 August 1986)
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When and why did you begin writing?

I began writing when I was about 15 years old. I was attending an Anglican boarding school in Swaziland called Saint Christopher's High School. It was a good school. Looking back, I think we all felt, as students, that we were in a rich schooling environment. Many of us had been taken there so that we could escape from the hideous system of Bantu Education in South Africa. The parents of many students there easily made up an impressive list of who's in the black political and cultural leadership in South Africa in the fifties and sixties. Consequently, we felt we were there as an exercise of protest and resistance. This gave us a strong sense of purpose, which they always communicated to us in various ways. And then there was much to facilitate learning: well-equipped laboratories, a well-stocked library, and a variety of extracurricular activities. We got a fairly good education.

Among several other cultural activities such as drama, music, debating, was also writing. We used to have these annual reports that each and every residential house had to produce. We were encouraged to contribute articles to these reports. I remember that my first effort was a poem in Zulu; I don't recall what it was about, but I still have some copies of that publication. I also wrote several plays, in both Zulu and English, which I produced and performed with my fellow students. It was good to see these works performed. I felt a pleasant sense of achievement.

Then in our last year, the class of 1966 started a newspaper we called **The Pioneer**. We produced a few issues, the last one of which contained some controversial articles which the principal did not particularly like. So it was banned. I remember that those of us who were on the editorial board (I think it was made up of Mbulelo Mzamane, Neo Mnumzane, Thandabantu Nhlapo, Gangi Mkele, and myself) were summoned to the principal's office for a reprimand. It was on the Saturday morning on which that particular issue of **The Pioneer** was going to come out. The paper was ready, for we had worked hard the previous day to put it together. I remember I had written a story about a migrant mine worker who had left the rural areas in search of work in

Johannesburg, and when he unexpectedly returns home one day, he finds out his wife was having an affair with another man. The principal thought we couldn't have a school publication carrying articles that dealt with such adult "men-women relationships." (I still remember that particular expression vividly.) This sort of thing was not going to do the image of the school any good. There were, of course, several other articles of a political nature written by other students which the principal found rather objectionable.

What particularly bothered the principal was that we had prepared this particular edition to be sold at a big sports meeting, an annual athletics competition involving all the secondary high schools in Swaziland. We had figured that we could sell enough copies to make *The Pioneer* self-financing for a while. We also wanted to impress the other schools with our publication. It was going to be the only one of its kind to be sold there. So we had made sure that this issue was going to be a bumper issue. The banning kind of dampened our spirits. It deprived us of our moment of glory. I don't think we wrote much after that.

When you went to the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland here at Roma, were there any creative outlets on campus?

Yes. Immediately after I got here in 1969, I took over the editorship of a magazine called *Expression* that had been started some years before by students of English. They used to call themselves the Literary Circle, but we started something called the English Society, specifically for the study of literature. So we took over *Expression*. But we decided that *Expression* should be reserved exclusively for creative writing. We thought we would start another magazine, to be called *The English Journal*, for scholarly writing. Such thinking was obviously too ambitious. The latter publication never saw the light of day. But we did produce two editions of *Expression* during my editorship. I was particularly proud of the second issue. It was modelled after *The Classic*, the Johannesburg literary magazine started by Can Themba and Nat Nakasa. There was an insert of black and white photographs of the paintings of Philemon Motsusi, a local Maseru artist. There was also a critical appreciation of the paintings. Later I became the President of the Students' Representative Council and was instrumental in resuscitating the student newspaper called *The Spark*. We published a couple of numbers.

Was it out of these early literary activities that you formed the ambition of becoming a writer?

Certainly. In fact, even before I came to the university, I had already got my first poem

published. It appeared in *The Classic* in 1968 or early in 1969, I think. That gave me great encouragement. It felt good to have published in the same magazine in which Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Nadine Gordimer, Nat Nakasa, and others had published. Subsequently, when I was already at Roma, I got others published in *The Purple Renoster*, in *Izwi*, and in *Contrast*. So, before I came to the university I already had a taste of publishing, and I had made up my mind that I would become a writer.

It is interesting to note that had I gone directly to the university after matriculating in Swaziland, I would most probably have followed a career in science, for at school I was very good in the science subjects—mathematics and physics-with-chemistry, in both of which I was awarded prizes. Instead, I spent about two years doing odd jobs like escorting back home lost and delinquent children who had been picked up by the police far from home. I also taught for a while at Witbank, and then took up correspondence courses towards the London University Advanced Level Certificate in Mathematics and English Literature. It was during this time that, after the cocoon of high school in Swaziland, I got more and more involved with the problems of the world. I began to understand with greater clarity the problems of South Africa: the mass resettlements, the intricacies of the pass laws, township life with its culture of shebeens, poverty, skin lightening creams, the patronage politics of Township Advisory Boards, etc. Having experienced all these things before as part of my world of growing up, I now began to see them in a clearer light; the sudden growth of insight made me feel I was being born again. Like most black students at the time who were actively involved, I also became involved in the white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), through which I saw some white people quite closely for the first time. All this helped to bury my scientific interests. It became clear that when I eventually went to the university, I would pursue an academic career in the humanities. So, I majored in philosophy and English literature.

What was the English curriculum like in those days?

Fortunately, it was beginning to be flexible. The Department of English had been following with great interest the debates that were taking place in African universities in East and West Africa about the role of English and African literatures in Africa. On the whole, our Department was one of the earliest ones on the whole continent to be decolonized, as it were. By the time I got there, we had a fair share of the major African writers on the syllabus. We studied Soyinka, Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, Camara Laye, Elechi Amadi, J.P. Clark—all those who were major figures. They were required readings. In those days—I'm talking about the period from August 1969 to May 1973, when I was here—the syllabus was somewhat inflexible; there were very few opportunities to play around with courses. We did almost everything that was on the

syllabus. So we had to study those African authors seriously. They were not just an exotic optional sideline. We even had a creative writing course.

What did you do after you completed your degree?

After teaching English and Mathematics for a few months at a high school in Teyateyaneng, Lesotho, I went to Cambridge in the UK with my wife and son: a young family~ I didn't do much writing there because I was busy absorbing a new culture. Also, coming from South Africa, I was learning some surprising home truths about the human ordinariness of the legendary whiteman.

Getting down to meeting the demands of the Cambridge tripos, I studied Shakespeare and the irrepressible Elizabethans. I also studied Joyce and many of the modern English and European writers. I was really grappling with a conventional degree program in English as well as with the literary and political culture of Cambridge at the time. I attended a few lectures by controversial figures such as Colin McCabe and Stephen Heath, who were among the radicals in the English literary establishment at the time. Of course, I also attended Raymond Williams's lectures, and caught a glimpse or two of F.R. Leavis a few times. It was most elevating to actually see all those people whose books I had used as textbooks. I was also involved in drama and theatre performances. I acted in two plays. One was a Neruda play called *The Splendor and Death of Joaquin Murieta*, and the other was written by a student of Churchill College (my college) based on the life of Gordon in Khartoum. I stayed in Cambridge from 1973 to 1975.

One of the experiences of being away from home is how exile can suddenly turn you into an ardent nationalist. As you observe and absorb another culture, you experience the fervent wish that your own culture could share in the achievements of the new culture. As I got awed by new adventures in the literary culture of the world, I felt that my own language should participate in this culture through literature written in it. For that reason, while I was reading Joyce, I experimented with the stream of consciousness in Zulu. All seemed fine in the fascination of the moment, until you look at the experiment the following day, and the futility of empty emulation stares back at you. All in all, I didn't do much writing in Cambridge.

And then you went directly to Denver?

No, I returned to Lesotho in July 1975 to begin teaching in the Department of English at the university in September of that same year. There, I continued the traditional academic pursuit along the lines of Cambridge. I'm referring simply to the day-to-day

grind of teaching and researching, attending numerous university meetings, etc. My period of creative dormancy continued. But all along I did feel rather guilty that I was not writing. It was the latent guilt, I think, that made me decide that should I ever go for further studies, I would try to get into a program that would compel me to devote a lot of my energy to developing my writing skills. That is why I decided to go to Denver University.

A special boon was that Ayi Kwei Armah joined us in the Department of English in 1977. He was an extremely invigorating presence who revived the creative writing program. (I indicated earlier that we had this course.) Armah gave it more solidity, direction, and dynamism. He also gave much impetus to the revision of the entire Department's syllabus. Certainly, having him here stirred my creative roots.

Were there publishing outlets here for writers at that time?

Not on campus. The students who were involved in politics produced their own newspaper called *The Vanguard*, a radical publication. That was mainly a political organ. It was good having it on campus for it livened things up a bit. The students of creative writing gave a lot of exciting public readings of their work.

In South Africa the situation was very different. The spirit of revolt, fuelled by the Black Consciousness Movement, was sweeping the country, and many cultural groups were springing up throughout the country. One of them, Medupe, visited our campus and took it by storm with their poetry recitation accompanied by drumming. That was when we first heard Ingoapele Madingoane reciting his 'Africa My Beginning.' Staffrider came up and we saw an unprecedented flowering of poetry, painting, and drama. *The Classic* tottered along, and once in a while you would get an issue coming out. Then Sipho Sepamla came up with *S'ketsh*. But as far as literature was concerned, until Staffrider came along, the outlets were relatively limited for most aspiring black writers. There were, of course, several other "established" outlets such as *Contrast* and *New Coin*. But something told me I did not quite belong to those magazines.

To what extent were you in contact with other writers who were emerging in Southern Africa at the time?

To some extent. Remember, I had not really published much, although the few poems I had published were drawing some attention, and also, being in Lesotho, I was somewhat isolated. But I was in contact with a few writers: Sepamla, Serote, Mtshali and of course, as always, Mzamane. As a student I had met Nadine Gordimer. Also Stephen Gray and Phil Du Plessis. I had exchanged some correspondence with Mafika

Gwala. When I met each of these people for the first time, I found that we were all aware of one another's work. For the first time, around that time, I felt that I was part of a community of writers. It gave me a sense of commitment. It was gratifying to know that some colleagues would read what I wrote. Feeling that you belong can be a great reinforcement.

One important contact at the time was Zeke Mphahlele, whom I had long admired. He was the one who encouraged me to go to Denver and introduced me to the people there. But by the time I got to Denver he had left a few years earlier, first to Philadelphia, and then back to South Africa on that historic return. He visited Denver for a semester while I was there.

What kind of impact did the Denver program have on your own development?

A tremendous impact, not from the point of view of helping me to make up my mind to be a writer, but from the point of view of providing me an opportunity to write and to spend three and a half years grappling with literary techniques. I was also teaching there so I was able to develop the discipline of managing to work and write at the same time. Particularly valuable was the opportunity to discuss my writing with established writers who were teaching in the program. This is important for a writer: to have someone who can enable you to solve artistic problems with practical advice. My teachers would help you to identify a problem in your work and leave it to you to find a solution. They could also refer you to works of specific authors who may have had similar problems and solved them. The seminars were extremely valuable. They enabled one to get used to giving and receiving criticism.

One important personal discovery I made was the power of memory in literary creativity. I was far away from the subject of my writing, yet I found the recall of memory extremely invigorating aesthetically. I mean, being away from home, I was able to return there a lot more vividly through my imagination than if I were actually there. Looking back, it was as if memory was the very substance of technique, commanding me to reflect the images with accurate detail. When a writer is called upon to imagine a situation more fully, he is really being told to engage his inner eye more fully and to be guided by the absolute detail of his memory.

I also discovered that I write better when the temperature is warm to hot~

Were you writing fiction primarily at this time?

Yes, primarily. I had abandoned poetry somewhere along the way without

really knowing why. I think I felt that poetry was not giving me enough room to explore in detail the South African problem. At that particular point in my intellectual development and, consequently, in my enhanced and committed understanding of social, political, and economic issues, I needed an art form that would allow me to be a lot more expansive and explorative of some of the South African themes I wanted to write about. For example, I wanted to be able to render as concretely as possible, my major focus of artistic interest: setting and character. Trying to establish philosophically, similarities and differences between poetry and fiction is a project fraught with difficulties. So, also, is the task to find out why a writer will decide to write a story at one moment and a poem at another. Basically, I think I was looking for a certain approach to artistic insight: a generally demonstrative, overall effect rather than an essentially evocative one; a breaking down of intuitive knowledge so that its components can be clearly revealed and understood. Fiction appears to have presented itself to me as the method most appropriate to my concerns.

Was all your writing being done in English?

Yes. I had stopped writing in Zulu. This does not mean that I had not been making any attempts at writing in my mother language. Remember my Cambridge experience earlier? There, I started a novel in Zulu. Do you remember this character in Camus's *The Plague* who keeps on starting his novel but never goes beyond the opening sentences? I did that. Six years later when I was in Denver I was still starting this novel in Zulu. I think I was experiencing an internal clash between what I politically recognized as being ultimately desirable on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what was feasible and historically practical and essential at the present moment. I had to come to terms with the practicality of writing in English, as opposed to the political desirability of writing in Zulu.

Why is it that you write in English?

I always say that basically, the reason I write in English has very little to do with an originally conscious intention. All kinds of arguments have been advanced to stress the importance of why Africans should continue to write in English. One of them was that if you wrote in English, you had a wide international audience. That, of course, is true. But Tolstoy did not write in English. Nor did Ibsen, nor Thomas Mofolo. Yet their works are known the world over.

The thing is that whatever reasons are advanced, they must enhance our historical understanding of our particular South African predicament. For example, Brian Willan shows in his biography of Sol T. Plaatje, that way back in 1895, a small

group of educated Africans in Kimberley, then a fairly new diamond settlement, formed an organization called the South Africans' Improvement Society, whose major aim was to help its members to "cultivate the use of the English language." They would meet to listen to each other speaking and reading English. Then they would subject the speaker's or reader's performance to some rigorous criticism. Now, black South Africans have always had a reputation for having an exceptional command of the "Queen's language~" (When you are very good at it, it is often said in the townships that you "speak it through the nose", in a reference to how stiff upper-lipped Englishmen literally seem to speak through the nose.) Now, this reputation is a result of a history of often conscious effort. The origins of this effort no doubt have something to do with the need for Africans to get well-paying jobs and promotion in a work environment dominated and controlled by the English. Such practices can gather a momentum of their own and soon assume the status of a tradition, one that may eventually have nothing to do with its practical origins.

I grew up knowing that it was desirable to master English. At High School, a book called *The Student's Companion* ensured that we competed with one another to master countless high-sounding expressions which would have to find their way into debates and other kinds of writing and speaking situations. You also had to accumulate in your memory a number of difficult words we called "terms." I remember the following: "he was a man of probity", "a bevy of girls", "a titanic difficulty", "a conglomeration of boys", "what confabulation is going on there?", etc. So there was a lot of informal reinforcement of the formal English lessons. Of course, we also did the same for Zulu, but then the situation with Zulu was not quite the same. Mastering Zulu had more to do with being impressive in exams than, additionally, to wear those Zulu words and expressions as badges of social success.

All of which is to suggest that after my early efforts in Zulu, I suddenly found myself writing in English precisely because as I went further ahead in my studies, I had less and less contact with Zulu. In other words, when my intellectual development did not go hand-in-hand with an opportunity to master the use of my indigenous language in a variety of intellectually enriching situations—indeed, from about Form Two onwards—learning in English became more intense. The novels, the plays, Shakespeare (with more impressive quotations to memorize and impress others with~), science, etc.—everything was done in the medium of English. Outside of the school, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, films, detective, crime, and spy novels, etc., reinforced the use of this language. It is worth noting that even Africans who do not speak English very well will choose to write letters to one another in English. A very interesting phenomenon.

So, it was more a set of very identifiable historical circumstances that forced me in this particular linguistic direction rather than a conscious, principled decision on my part. If I were to write in Zulu now, I think I would have to spend a tremendous amount of intellectual energy trying to master the language for literary purposes. I have simply not used the language very much for that kind of artistic activity. I would have to spend a lengthy period of apprenticeship in the same way that I spent a lengthy apprenticeship trying to master English for artistic purposes. If I decided to write in Zulu tomorrow, I couldn't just sit down and produce an artistically respectable novel. I would have to pay my dues first, but I don't feel at this particular time that I want to spend my energies in that direction.

Ngugi has recently been making the argument that African writers ought to be developing literatures in their own languages. How do you respond to that?

First of all, as I remarked earlier, I have always grappled with the problem. In 1976 I had arrived at conclusions similar to Ngugi's in discussions with Siphos Sepamla at the inaugural conference of the Institute of Black Studies. So when Ngugi started his crusade, many people, I believe, had been grappling with this matter and had arrived at similar conclusions. For example, the debate had been ranging in the pages of *Transition* many years ago. The point is that the need is almost self-evident. It is ultimately desirable that things should work out that way.

We have to note, though, that from the dawn of colonialism Africans have declared the need for freedom. But since they could not have it just then, they had to contend with forms of struggle available to them at the time. Some of those struggles may have put people in an invidiously compromising situation. Strategy may have meant going along with the oppressive dispensation until the conditions were finally conducive to decisive action.

At what point does one become critically aware of an historically determined problem and then seek to intervene consciously and concertedly? Ngugi arrived at his solution in the context of his own understanding of his personal development as a writer, in the context of his understanding of the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Kenya, and of the possibilities of his own contribution to that struggle. He had reached a point where he could suggest a definite solution in a particular area of struggle. Of course, I agree with his findings, but I'm not sure that I would agree with the timeliness of his crusade. It may not be objectively as valid as a universal solution even in Kenya at this particular moment. It is easy for one to mistake a subjective significance for an objective fact. The fact is, it is always problematic to impose linguistic solutions on people.

What I mean is this: at this particular point in time, Ngugi has a very established career. He has written his novels and his plays. He is safe from suffering the anxiety of lack of output. When he needed to express himself urgently, English was there for him to use readily. And now, he certainly can put aside time to master the Gikuyu language for artistic purposes. Many people who have come out of the same colonial milieu are not yet in the same position. Ngugi cannot impose the logic of his own development on others. Of course, Ngugi has argued that if people recognize the intellectual validity of his position, they then should accept the practical implications of that recognition. At that point, Ngugi prescribes personal commitment. Of course, one can be committed in other ways, such as encouraging young people to write in their own languages, and struggling to influence educational policy in one's particular country.

But as far as my own personal artistic and linguistic needs are concerned right now, I am still going through the period when it is crucial for me to write in a language that is readily available to me, NOW. I am eager to communicate NOW. I can't afford the time nor the energy to go through another period of apprenticeship. Maybe I will, when I have written enough to try other things—like Ngugi.

Would I discourage anyone who wants to write in his own language? No. I would give them all the encouragement since I am involved in combatting a tradition that stressed the superiority of one language over another. All the languages of South Africa are important. Much needs to be done to promote African languages. But would I write in Zulu now? No. This is a contradiction that I insist ought to be understood in its historical context. It is a contradiction that I have come to terms with. Putting the problem in this manner helps to provide a realistic sense of perspective from which more realistic solutions can be worked out.

There is another historical fact to contend with, particularly in South Africa. It is that empirical research has shown the phenomenal growth of a working-class, urban population in South Africa since the beginning of this century. The growth of education and the economy, as well as other trappings of a modern technological culture, no matter how flawed, has meant the growth of a working-class public that reads and speaks English. This is a matter that cannot be taken too lightly.

The question for us in South Africa at the moment is this: does English pose a formidable barrier to the conceptualization and expression of liberation? Does the use of English, either by the oppressed or by the oppressor, significantly interfere with the social perception of injustice? If so, it would be more realistic for us to combat the

misuse of English than to seek to abandon the language summarily. To undertake the former would be a significant contribution to the highly refined methods of intellectual combat. Note, those methods of combat would equally be relevant in combatting the misuse of indigenous languages, for they too can be used to cloud issues. All-in-all, this problem of language should not be allowed to cloud the real issue: the need for freedom and the use of whatever means available to advance the cause of freedom. If English is part of the armory, why make some writers feel guilty for using it? It would be tragic the day South African writers started wrangling over which language people had to write in. Rather, we should fight to create conditions in which people would feel free to write and speak in whatever language they wish. Yes, we will note the fundamental validity of Ngugi's position, but insist on approaching its practical implications as creatively as possible.

Which writers have been most influential in your own development?

It's very hard to say because I can be very impressionable. I remember when I was in Denver writing the story "Uncle", I began it in the third person and just went on and on, yet feeling that the story really was not working quite well. At that time, I happened to be taking a course on Faulkner, and after I read *As I Lay Dying*, I thought: "That's it~ My story must be like that." So I changed the point of view altogether. I started from scratch.

I think I'm influenced by many things that I read. The test is that if I feel the influence of something I'm reading entering into a story I happen to be writing at the time, and if a few days later, or on subsequent revisions, sometimes months later, the thing still reads fine, then I know I have domesticated the influence. But in general, South African writers that I read when I was young have left a deep mark. I'm thinking of Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Webster Makaza, Alan Paton, and Sibusiso Nyembezi. All these people, after the diet of Wordsworth, Shakespeare and Dickens on the school syllabus, made me feel that South African life was also a valid subject for literature. I could project my imagination on that familiar environment and learn a lot about it in the process.

I also remember struggling with a copy of the *Divine Comedy* when I was doing my matric. There was a poem I tried to write in Zulu, in which for the first time I was conscious of subjecting the South African situation to a consistent moral symbolism. Generally, I loved to struggle with something I was not forced to study. Consequently, I discovered on my own Auden, MacNiece, the Sitwells, Wilfred Owen, and others who influenced the way I wrote poetry. Then I came across Bernardo Honwana's superb collection of stories, *We Killed Mangy-Dog*. Since then, in my relatively adult

life, I have been captivated by the nineteenth century Russian novel; been impressed by the exuberant inventiveness of Joyce; by Armah's intensity and discipline of composition; and by the haunting power of Thomas Mofolo's imagination. I'm quite open to all kinds of influences.

Were all the stories in *Fools and Other Stories* written in Denver?

No. The only one that was not written there was "The Magic of the Violin." But then it was sort of perfected in Denver. I wrote it before I left Lesotho. "Uncle" had been in my mind for many years. As had "The Prophetess." I had always wanted to write about this woman who had exercised such a powerful hold on my imagination as a boy. I had always wanted to grapple with the power of mystery right back in the middle of urban life. Anyway, it all boils down to the fact that Denver provided me with the opportunity to do what I had always wanted to do. I wrote these stories there, but they had been in my mind for a long time before.

Most of the stories adopt the perspective of a young boy or a young man growing up and observing his world. Was this a deliberate strategy?

Well, almost everything about fiction or poetry becomes deliberate once you start working at the bare outlines of a story and filling it up with flesh. I like to think of it as a phase in my writing that is now over. When I started to write poetry, particularly in the period between leaving high school and coming to the university, I was writing about children all the time. The bulk of my early poetry is about childhood experience. I have often wondered what it was that made me write about children so much. I think I was drawn to the childhood perspective because it has a certain natural and powerful irony to it that enables adults to look at themselves with often shocking recognition. When you listen carefully to children playing house, and they are your children, then you can see how you're doing as a father by eavesdropping on whoever is playing father. Sometimes you look at some image of yourself coming at you raw, and it hits you. It was really that aspect of the childhood perspective that I began to explore deliberately, once I discovered that I liked to write about children. You just let the children tell things as they are. They don't have that conscious sense of irony that an adult watching and listening can see. They are not aware that they are saying things that mean much more than they themselves can understand. So, I consciously exploited that point of view. Of course, all this is better said than done. Actually doing it while hiding the artifice was one of the most engaging technical challenges I set myself.

Did most of the incidents recounted come from personal experience? Was this a

kind of portrait of the artist as a young man?

Always a tricky question because of the possible danger of public unmasking, and confirming some reader's worst fears. Of course, some of those things happened. For example, there was someone like the prophetess, and I used to fetch holy water from her. But I never had a bottle of holy water broken.irate bees once attacked a church service, but my uncle and mother were not there, and there was no taxi to whisk me away. There are many such examples. You always begin with something that actually happened and then end up with what never happened. But these stories were not really meant to be a portrait of me, even though Joyce's *Portrait* is one of my abiding loves in literature. I also enjoyed Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. My stories are not the proverbial "journey into the self." I was more interested in rendering certain social perceptions from an ironic stance. I wanted to lay bare some elements of social experience in township life in South Africa.

You've spoken of this as a phase in your writing. Are you going on to other things now? How would you define the direction of your current interests?

When I was at Yale, I started a children's story. I enjoyed doing that immensely. If this one succeeds, I'll probably write a few more. But I am now exploring adult themes more directly. The fascination with childhood has abated. I am now tackling some bigger issues. I still write stories but I've taken the plunge: I'm working on a novel.

Do you want to comment on the novel?

Well, probably not. There's a strange psychology involved here. Somehow, when you start talking about what you are doing, it seems to disappear. Now the bird is in your hand; you open the hand and the bird flies away. Why on earth did you open that hand?

You must be pleased with the reception that *Fools and Other Stories* has had. How many awards has it won now?

Three: the Noma Award, the Sanlam Award, and the Mofolo-Plomer Prize. The strange thing about these awards is that I've shared them with somebody else. I wonder if there's a meaning in all this? In 1986 I won the Pringle Award for a critical essay on South African literature. That too I shared with somebody else. Most interesting~

Anyway, I'm pleased about how the book is being received and how widely it's

being read. It has been fairly well distributed in South Africa, and Longman is distributing it in Zimbabwe. Recently, a friend of mine who returned from Australia told me that there were good reviews of *Fools* there. So, it's being read in Australia too~ That's nice. It's also been picked up on syllabuses of several universities both here in Southern Africa and abroad.

But the most wonderful thing about this is that the book is one of the most lasting images of Charterston township. The place no longer exists as it used to be. The racist authorities, realizing that the white suburb was expanding towards us, decided to relocate us to a place they would not see us, miles away from the city center, the places of work. So, they drove us away from the place, redesigned it, tarred all the streets, lit all the streets, installed water sewerage facilities, refurbished schools and recreation facilities, and then invited the so-called "coloureds", people of mixed descent, to live there. They were supposedly closer to the whites in terms of social distance.

Now, listen to this. Last year some researchers at the University of the Witwatersrand were preparing some teaching materials on *Fools*. One exercise involved making the students trace the movements of the characters in some of the stories. They could not find one single map of Charterston~ They could only find a map of the new settlement. So they wrote to me to supply them with the original names. When I was writing the stories, I had drawn up from memory a fairly accurate map of Charterston township. It feels good that my book has preserved the memory of my hometown.

Sometimes, on visiting my folks in Duduza, when I feel like renewing and savouring a little bitterness, if only to remind myself of the continuing, ugly reality of apartheid, I pass by old Charterston to see my home. It still stands there, evoking in me a warm nostalgia. Yet, at the same time, it transforms into a symbol of what Dostoevsky once called "rational malice", the orderly madness of apartheid.

What are your writing ambitions for the future?

At this point in my career, I wish I wasn't teaching. I have so many books to write in my mind. But I don't have a lot of time. I'm really getting anxious about the problem of time and about various other commitments making a bid for my attention. If I could write continuously for six months every year, I would be quite satisfied. But then, which writer does not dream of that?

What were you doing at Yale?

Two things. One, I started a lengthy research project into the history of black South African literary theory from the earliest time right up to today. It is an attempt to fill up a serious gap in the literary history of South Africa. Most of our fellow black writers, particularly the young ones, start their writing careers without a received tradition of relevant literary knowledge. This, of course, is one of the crimes of apartheid: the systematic destruction of the oppressed's sense of constructive cultural history. African children don't learn anything in the schools about their own historical achievements. The challenge of the future is to bring all this knowledge together so that it can find its way into the schools even during the moment of struggle. We must challenge the racist system of education with an alternative one.

So, I'm working on this project in order to help young writers know what their predecessors have been saying about the art of writing. Some progressive white academics have been doing an absolutely invaluable service in this regard. I'm thinking, for example, of the resuscitative seminal work of Tim Couzens in this very area. I'm having to go back to very old documents to pick up statements on art, fiction, and poetry. That is one of the things I started when I was in New Haven.

Secondly, I started on the novel. Thirdly, I wrote the children's story.

What proportion of your time do you devote to scholarly or academic projects such as the ones you've described and what proportion to your creative writing?

Because of my contractual obligations, I spend more of my time on academic work. I try to wake up very early in the morning every day in order to spend about an hour or two adding a new paragraph or a new sentence to work in progress. I don't always succeed in keeping this up. But I do try to begin my day with creative writing. But then as head of my department, I will go on to squander much of the day on memos.

In what direction do you see the teaching of literature at the University of Lesotho going?

I think we have reached another decisive point. I think now we need to look at the syllabus once more because the conditions have changed drastically. The last major revision of our syllabus was in 1977 or 1978 with the arrival of Ayi Kwei Armah. Since then, there has been a tremendous surge of writing throughout the continent, and there are many new writers and new texts that have to find their way into our syllabus. I'm thinking of names such as Dambudzo Marechera, Mariama Bo(a,²), Nurddin Farah, Odia Ofeimun, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, J.M. Coetzee, and others. In addition, there are various currents of criticism that have come up which need to be discussed and studied.

Also, we need to take into account major intellectual developments in the field of literature in other parts of the world. For example, I am thinking that developments in the field of cultural studies are worth exploring: the influence of the media on social thinking; forms of cultural adaptation; popular culture; contemporary intellectual currents in Africa; culture under apartheid; the place of English in the contemporary world, etc. In other words, the real, immediate world around us should be the subject of disciplined intellectual study in the university. Our syllabus should reflect a certain kind of progressive engagement with pressing contemporary issues in Lesotho, South Africa, etc.

Furthermore, in Lesotho we have a very strong indigenous literature in Sesotho, a language that is gaining greater and greater ascendancy in terms of the frequency of use at all levels in society. If there is one country where Ngugi's call for the promotion of indigenous languages would bear plenty of fruit, that country is Lesotho. Everybody in the country speaks the language. There is absolutely no reason why the language should not be at a much higher level of development as a language of science, commerce, law, and of every other major sphere of modern life. Anyway, we have to think about how to teach African literature, or other literatures of the world for that matter, in such a way as to feed into the needs of the local political, social, economic and cultural situation. That is a big challenge.

For example, let's take the teaching of English literature: the further we move away from the colonial days, the more difficult it becomes for us to assume that our students possess a certain basic knowledge of western culture. I think we've reached a point where we now need courses on the world's civilizations, just to give our students a sense of the world's cultural diversity and the place of Lesotho, Southern Africa, and Africa in that world. It's a matter of survival. There was a body of opinion which asserted that Africans should not waste time studying other cultures; that it was a form of pandering to imperial interests. I don't think so, necessarily. To learn about other countries is a matter of survival. For example, Lesotho, a very small country, should have courses on the problems of small countries of the world. How do they survive? What could we learn from them?

So, teaching western literature is meaningless unless some attention is given to the broader cultural history of Europe, showing how Europe came to hold the position in the world that it holds today. In other words, the teaching of literature has everything to do with extending our students' knowledge of the relationships of domination that still continue today. That should be our general perspective.

In addition, we have to ask serious questions about the state of contemporary culture in Lesotho. When you ask such questions, you are asking some very serious questions as well about the state of politics in the nation; about the state of economic development; about the state of social justice; about education. I think our syllabus should reflect our intellectual grappling with these issues. Even when we read and study a novel from Nigeria, for example, we have to view it in the context of what's happening in Africa today. Our courses, our syllabus, must set out deliberately to answer these questions and move away from an approach to African literature that sees it as merely a replacement of English literature. I think that period has passed, hopefully never to return. There's no need anymore to attempt to justify the existence of African literature; it's there, for better or for worse, forever, and we need to go forward and ask ourselves further questions about our societies, and about how we can extend our students' knowledge of the problems of their societies through a serious confrontation with literature.

Would you still be trying to achieve some kind of balance between the universal picture and the local picture?

In Lesotho we have no alternative but to do that: to seek this balance. Our geopolitical situation demands that of us. In order for us to break the geopolitical stranglehold, we have to reach out and embrace the world and break through the stifling parochiality of apartheid culture. Our salvation lies in a tactical cosmopolitanism.

Are there constraints on writers and academics here such as one finds, for example, in South Africa?

It would be sad the day Lesotho is mentioned in the same breath as South Africa. No. There is no discernible pattern of constraints. Edgar Motuba, an outspoken journalist and editor of *Leselinyana*, was murdered in mysterious circumstances during the reign of the last government. Also, the university was subject to a period of concerted terror and intimidation, again towards the end of the last government. Things could have got worse. But, on the whole, in my many years of teaching here, I have experienced no noticeable pattern of government interference with what was being taught at the university.

One incident I remember was when B.M. Khaketla published his *1970: An African Coup Under Microscope*. For some time it was quite dangerous to possess that book. I don't know if it was actually banned. The book deals with events leading to the coup of 1970 when the last government refused to relinquish power after they had lost the elections.

You see, there is a serious gap between young writers and old writers. We are all aware of the big names such as Machobane, Mofolo, Ntsane, the Khaketlas, etc. Most of these big names are well over sixty. Some have passed away. Then if you look at those between say twenty and forty years of age writing and publishing in Lesotho today, it would be difficult to come up with names as famous. They are not as well known as their predecessors. Now, some of the older work may have been controversial in its day, and may have angered the British or the missionaries, or whoever was in a position of power. But today we really have nothing much for the authorities to feel challenged by. So, things are rather disturbingly quiet. Note that when I say it's quiet, this does not necessarily mean or reflect a particularly conscious liberal attitude on the part of the church or the government. It's simply that there's a silence, and you don't know what would happen if there was a new surge of writing that addressed itself to very sensitive contemporary issues. The older writers tended to write on a relatively restricted compass of themes: tradition versus modernity; Wordsworthian nature poems; the misfortunes of orphans, etc. I think any serious contemporary writers would most definitely be influenced by the contemporary African novel in English and in French and would therefore be likely to tackle themes that would make anyone in authority think again. I think there's room for writers to take advantage of this relative silence to write. Nobody will stop them. But what will happen once the material gets published and produced? You can't anticipate the response of authority at the moment.

How would you explain the gap you referred to?

I should think that one explanation is that writing and art in general have not been considered, in a technical sense, as national development priorities. Instead, culture has partly been thought of as people dancing for tourists outside of the Victoria Hotel, that kind of thing. In the schools, for example, although students are being taught how to read and write, no strong literary culture has developed beyond the classroom. Most people get exposure to literature in the schools, but as soon as they finish, they may not read another book. We need to have a semblance of a living literary culture. There isn't even a modern vigorous press to talk about. No wonder writers are not being reproduced.

I remember in a conference on children's literature held some time ago in Maseru, one missionary publisher said that they were not in the business of making a profit, so they don't review books, and they don't advertise their books. I've always thought that was kind of strange. I suppose they have a right to their views, but I don't think there's anything wrong in reviewing a book so that people can know about its

existence. On the contrary, it would be helping to educate God's people.

We need to emphasize the importance of creative writing programs more than ever. There's always a debate about whether you can teach people how to write. Such a concern, under our circumstance, is not one to be taken too seriously. What is paramount now is simply to be able to put some people in a room and give them time to write.

But there's another problem. There's nothing wrong with producing literature for children. The problem develops when literary culture becomes associated with producing a special kind of literature for the schools. 'Children are not the only readership. The imaginative capacity of people continues to want to be challenged well beyond the classroom. I think a fixation with the classroom has had a devastating effect on the intellectual culture of adults who have left school a long time ago. One of the challenges of publishing in Lesotho today is to make adults feel they are adults by producing for them a literature commensurate with the level of their insights as adults. This is a side of development that is seldom considered, but in the final analysis, the visionary capacity of people also needs to be fed. And that is where literature comes in, and the arts in general.