



## Exploring the Banal and Extremes of Apartheid in the Poetry of Oswald Mtshali

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### ABSTRACT

This article scrutinizes the effects and consequences of South Africa's institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and dominion by the white minority. The deliberate massacre, imposition and infliction of bodily and mental torture, as well as the infringements on the freedom of its victims, has had adverse effects on them; alongside the degradation of the blacks racially. These, among many unprintable others, have been some of the pressing charges against apartheid. Furthermore, there are blatant denials of all forms of freedom, expropriation of landed property, exploitation of labour and persecution of individuals or organizations that oppose apartheid. Consequences such as unequal access to power and resources are some of the human indignities writers in South Africa have addressed at the expense of their lives, while others faced incarcerations, book-ban and (or) exile. South African writers like Oswald Mtshali (in an insider's account) have created pungent pictures and diminutive descriptions of the horrid world-denounced oppression-meted on the non-white population/the blacks of South Africa. The paper presents a select-few of Mtshali's themes stringed on a tartlet and evocative imagery which inflicts highly infectious feelings on his readers. Some of his inscriptions are seemingly borne on the beheaded-sweats and spilt-blood of the victims of one of the unfortunate accidents of history.

### INTRODUCTION

"Apartheid" is a Dutch word which delineates the racist policy of separate development of South Africa's leading racial groups which included the Whites, Coloured, Indians, and Black Africans. The nefarious regime run by the Afrikaners Boers aligned the highest priority and the best of everything in the land to the whites, and the worst and least of all priorities to the blacks. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English* defines apartheid as a political system practiced by the then South African white minority government, in which people of dissimilar races are separated.

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In the then South African apartheid enclave, the blacks were forbidden to live in cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town; where modern amenities for cozy lifestyles are located-in sharp contrast to the want, deprivation and denials of the Soweto and her ghettos. If however, any black lived in the city, he was kept for proximity purposes, employed as menial labourers, domestic hands in white homes or in the offices out of sight out in servant quarters.

Apartheid as a political system of governance by its scary manifesto of *apart hood* and discrimination also presage adverse salient features of man's inhumanity to man. It meted out shabby treatment to other racial groups apart from the whites who posed as lords with unfeigned airs of superiority. Some of the glaring manifestations of this satanic policy then, included marginalization, exploitation, discrimination, brutality, deprivation, poverty, insecurity and general unease among others. The harsh and precarious nature of the treatment meted out on the blacks resulted in intense suffering, bondage and shame. They lived face to face with dehumanization-under strict surveillances at slightest provocation-usually with high toll on lives of old, young and children.

Apartheid as it was then, meant loss of liberty, as blacks had to move about with a pass, which came to signify his blackness, identical too, with inferiority. The whites used "whites only" signs to identify essential services on exclusive reservations for them. They lived separately. The dirty suburbs of South Africa belonged to the blacks such as "District 6," Ezekiel Mphahlele's "second avenue" are well visited sites in their literatures.

The derogation of the blacks further led to their confinement to the geographically unproductive parts of the land aptly echoed by Alan Paton's in his book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The result was obvious, thirst, hunger, malnutrition, disease, and death on man and livestock. Other problems included the rural-urban drift with many of such cases manifesting in their literature-as societal victims in the character sketches of Absalom Kumalo in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Willie boy in Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*, and in "Amagoduka at Glvencoe station" by Oswald Mtshali in *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*.

The impact of this unfortunate accident of history on the elites group was very devastating, perhaps to the point of shattering of their imaginations. However, a good number of them responded by venting their voices against the injustices meted out on them and their citizens in their literature. Prominent among whom were/are writers like Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Arthur Nortje, Oswald Mtshali, and Athol Fugard. Keorapetse Kgositsile, Mazisi Kunene and Bessie Head. Some liberal white writers such as Nadine Gordimer, the Nobel Laureate for literature, Alan Paton, with other foreign writers, contributed immensely in heralding the message abroad in their literature.

These, among many other writers refused to remain silent, to surrender to the white monster. This explains why every one of them struggled to say something about the strange and weird system of governance. Their

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manacled wrists, caged minds and shackled souls could not hinder their inputs. Many South African writers faced glaring horrors with attendant risks. The coloured, ambivalent writer, Dennis Brutus suffered incarceration where he wrote his horror collection of prison poems, *Letters to Martha*. Their entire beings were swamped by the raw-nerved pictures of pains and scenes of horror, which of course, informed their subject matter and theme. This proves the relevance of the symbiotic relationship of art, society and the artist, since “the artist is not an air-plant that hangs without roots”. He is politically and socially informed, which has always come to bear on his themes.

The whole idea of protest is a world-wide phenomenon, which means then that the poet wherever he may be, whether in Africa, the then Soviet, America, or Asia, will continue to revolt against injustice. Such reactions are natural impulses against oppression, degradation, and subjugation just as the South African writers did, throwing caution to the wind in most cases until peace was restored. It should be noted though that South African poets employed social criticism with the intention of instilling awareness in the people, but recorded as witnesses the atrocities of the apartheid establishment, even as Mandelstam and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have done in exposing the shortcomings of the Soviet system.

Perhaps it is pertinent to start by recalling Mazisi Kunene’s ‘Thought of June 26’ which chronicles the story of the people’s opposition to apartheid. True to its name, the South African mind was tailored to write on no other thing but apartheid. The venom was the stuffing intense pressure on their faculties forcing them to address this singular concern year in and out. Notwithstanding the number of creative talents arrested, maimed and manacled by such a concern for as many years as apartheid lasted. The poem, thus questions the rationale behind a policy that fuels the spirit of racial segregation, injustice, servitude and bondage of the black man. It also expresses concern over the wastage of the strong and healthy human resources under the servitude of its draconian minority government, as he vengefully renders in the following lines:

was I wrong when I thought all shall be avenged  
was I wrong when I thought  
the rope of iron holding the neck of the iron bulls  
shall be avenged

Vengeance is the outright concern of the poem written to mark South Africa’s freedom day observed by the African National Congress (ANC) in 1950 and to commemorate the brutal murder of 18 black South Africans on May Day demonstration that year; thus the theme of retribution pervades the poem, as the poet’s desire for retaliation mounts.

The mirroring of the monstrous face of apartheid soon becomes the norm of South African’s literary creation. The wide range of engagements in such literature actually cut across all the three genres of literature. These

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efforts helped to publicize the bizarre situation which along with the activities of the ANC puts pressure on world bodies to equally pressurize the evil regime to abandon its policy, more so, as it is declared inhuman and abominable. In its bid to remain in power the apartheid regime emitted edicts and laws one after another that were out rightly repressive. The documentation of ungodly laws and edicts also helped to publicize their selfish and unpopular regime.

These writers' in their literary productions have effectively blown off the cover of the perpetrators of wickedness in South Africa. Peter Abrahams was cited to have modeled his works after Richard Wright, by depicting the situation in **Mine Boy** and **Wild Conquest**.

#### **Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali**

This paper seeks to limit itself to the poet – messenger, who refuses to be muffled by the repressive laws of South Africa. The choice of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali is not informed by any other quality, a part of this one fact that he stands out. His role as a poet confers on him the responsibility of addressing oppression and its effects on the society and the individual in which *fear* is employed as an element of craft and theme which critics believe pervade his works.

Oswald Mtshali was born in 1940 in Vryheid, Kwazulu – Natal. His early school years were spent at Vryheid where he matriculated but was denied access at the University of Witwatersrand by the then racist government because of the separate universities legislation. Moving from grass to grace, the poet worked as a messenger in Soweto, after which he wrote his first volume of poetry, **Sounds of the Cowhide Drum** in 1971. He later left for the United States, where he studied creative writing at the University of Columbia. Mtshali is now an associate Professor at the New City College of Technology where he teaches African folklore and modern African history. He was awarded the Olive Schreiner poetry award in 1971, and the Poetry International Award, London in 1973.

The poet writes in both Zulu and English. **Sounds of a Cowhide Drum** is said to evoke his traditional Zulu childhood, believed to have documented the effects of apartheid on working men of South Africa. The volume of poems was very popular with the white liberal South Africans, which perhaps resulted in diverse derogatory comments about his tone of poetry. Most blacks asserted that his resistance to the apartheid oppressive laws was weak-kneed as well as being accused of complacency.

From the onset, Mtshali seems to approach the apartheid situation with apparent ease, which could have informed his peculiar deployment of poetic devices as it is observed to have an overdose of irony and cynicism which usually aids humour. His style enhances accessibility, while his restrained anger earns him popularity even among the whites. His protest against the inhumanities in South Africa has been observed to lack direction or postulation of any solution.

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However, records also abound of critics who hail his effort for documenting the struggle of apartheid, especially as he wrote the collections within South Africa. His second volume, titled, **Fireflames** (1980), has a radical tonal change which makes it forceful and militant, more strongly built on Zulu culture. Its fiery passion, earns it a ban by the South African government.

**The Agony of a Poet in Despair**

The collection of poems titled **Sounds of a Cowhide Drum** occasionally eludes to the Zulu background without a developed feature of its essence. Mtshali indicts the racist regime in quite a number of poems but the first collection has been characterized by clichés suggestively bereft of hope and (or) escapist. In 'Men in Chains' where the poet questions the seizure of arable land from the blacks and why they are carelessly jailed he does not appear to give the blacks hope:

...six men  
Men shorn  
Of all human honour  
Like sheep after shearing?  
Bleating at the blistering wind  
Go away, cold wind: go away  
Can't you see we are naked (8).

Instead of making a strong statement after such a brilliant observation, he recoil in despair and resigns with "frustration". He concludes this poem with clichés such as "oh Dear Sun! /won't you warm my heart/with hope/The train went on its way to nowhere". . This tendency to helplessness is expressed throughout the collection. On page 57, he makes a similar declaration, "How can't? /my wrists/ are manacled/ my mind/is caged/my soul shackled".

Similarly, in 'The Washerwoman's Prayer' he exposes the woman in economic bondage with "fainting fits", "foaming mouth," and "gushing gibberish" and yet without a title or a glimmer of hope. Mtshali characteristically resigns to fate. The woman's prayer is indicative of hopelessness and thus disastrously ends in a spineless prayer:

Thank you lord! Thank you lord  
Never again will I ask  
Why must I carry this task? (17).

There is also the case of a victim that has been lashed by a human hurricane elsewhere and in like manner the poet apportions the status of "a minute beetle" hiding under a clod of sand to the persona who is "ready to be squeaked by a white beach stroller's foot" (65) In fact, this poem is reminiscent of Brutus's poem, 'More terrible than a beast in which Brutus equates the white man to an "iron monster" and the oppressed "a butterfly."

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In Brutus's poem, the butterfly "egg dances with nimble wariness" for survival, while, Mtshali's victim merely laments helplessly. Nothing seems to change as far as some of these poems are concerned.

This idea is confirmed by these lines; "My body writhes helplessly in a python's crush/ and my mind is strangled in the tentacles/ of an octopus". (65). Mtshali's 'Always a suspect' also graphically portrays the daily indignities suffered by the blacks in various facets of life without any hold on hope or plan of action for solution. This the poem Nadine Godimer describes as "fine, courteous, and humorous".

The poem 'If you should know me' is seen as the poet's manifesto by Godimer, in which the poet sketches a portrait of himself as a young African native, proud of being a Zulu, but equally inexperienced, tender and needing direction. As the poem gives tribute to his Zulu heritage, it tends to exhibit the tendency of being more ambitious than most of the poems in the collection under, but it still lacks the revolutionary vision such a poem actually needs.

It is pertinent however to observe here too, that the poems in this volume dwell more on indictments of laws and practices that are common sights to visitors to South Africa. Such laws include the Separate Amenities Act, Immorality Act, and laws on education are common subjects in his poetry. We see such in the poem, 'Pigeons at the Oppendheimer Park' in which he beautifully juxtaposes the rights of birds and that of the blacks:

Everyday I see these insolent bird's perched  
On 'White Only' benches  
Defying all authority.  
Don't they know of the separate  
Amenities Act? (16).

Poverty and hunger are portrayed as social problems in South Africa, as they obtain among the blacks. In 'The Face of Hunger' he narrates the pathetic story of a child he likens to a lizard. This reminds us of Chinua Achebe's 'Christmas in Biafra' for sameness of subject matter and imagery.

The next volume of Mtshali's poems titled '**Fireflames**' is however radically different from **Sounds of a Cowhide Drum** which is speculated to be his answer to the public criticism he sustained over the later: The title of **Sounds of a Cowhide Drum** is explained by an image in the following lines, "I am the drum on your dormant soul/ out from black hide sacrificial of cow/I am the spirit of your ancestors." This poem has what it takes to say there is impact of oral traditions on Mtshali's works. It is worthy of note too, that tradition, especially the Zulu culture played "a vital role in the black poetry movement against apartheid – the system of brutal racial separation and dissemination practiced in South Africa until 1994."

According to Mtshali, the drum is the symbol of transmission in African culture, whether of good or bad news or even of war. The boom! Boom! Boom! Sound was "a rallying cry for all the oppressed black people to rise up

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and fight for the evil system of apartheid” (Mtshali 1991). The poet believes that the resonance also serves as a wake up call for complacent white minority to heed the cry of the browbeaten black majority.

Mtshali also saw apartheid as an “epitome of divisiveness whose antithesis” was essentially the poetic spirit which “transcends boundaries and crosses all the borders of culture, ethnicity, race, colour, creed or gender. He has this enthusiastic belief which he shares with other South African poets, like Mazisi Kunene, thus that:

As long as the flame kindled  
by the poetic spirit remains alive,  
hope will always spring eternal  
enabling us to triumph over the  
forces of darkness. Mtshali (1991).

The poem “Sounds of a Cowhide Drum” with its Boom! Boom! Boom! Also stands for his loyalty to Zulu culture which I believe appears as the poet’s manifesto. A careful perusal through the following lines would disclose such conjecture:

Boom! Boom! Boom!  
I am the drum of your dormant soul  
out from the black hide of a sacrificial cow  
I am the spirit of your ancestors  
habitant in hallowed huts  
eager to protect  
forever vigilant  
let me tell you of your precious heritage  
of glorious past trampled by the conqueror  
destroyed by the zeal of a missionary  
I lay bare facts for scrutiny  
by your searching mind, all declarations and dogmas  
Boom! Boom! Boom!  
That is the sound of a cowhide drum -  
The voice of mother Africa (Sounds...28).

**Theme of Hostility and Dehumanization**

The poem ‘Nightfall in Soweto’ depicts hostility and dehumanization of the blacks. Soweto is an acronym from South, West townships used to describe a group of townships of more than a million people, mostly black Africans of South West Johannesburg. It contains atrocious ghettos where most blacks live, but work in the city and commute there everyday. Life in Soweto was callous, making the residents to put up with all forms of deprivations and dehumanization. The effect is tension, fear, violence and terror, especially at night, as graphically captured in the poem below. The dormant figure of speech is personification. *Nightfall* is used as a predator imposing menace to

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peace, in which the blacks live in perpetual apprehension of death. Death is always lurking around:

Nightfall always comes like  
a dreaded disease  
seeping through the pore  
of a healthy body  
And ravaging it beyond repair (18).

The dreadfulness of the night reduces man into a mere prey by which he becomes a quarry that is run down by the marauding beast which is let loose by “cruel nightfall” from his rage of death. The tone is ruthless, conveying with it degrees of sting as it portrays the dead deeds of the night. The animal imagery feature the savage white “law” official who becomes a beast while the black changes into an inconsequential being, “A murderous hand/lurking in the shadows /ravaging it beyond repair”. The fact that the blacks live in constant terror is bare:

Cornered by the fear as in  
my helplessness I languish  
I am the quarry to be run down  
By the marauding beast .....  
.....from the cage of death!  
I tremble at his crunching footsteps  
I quake at this deafening knock at the door (21).

The use of personification and irony depicts *terror* and *death* instead of the hopes of a pleasurable night rest after a tough day’s labour. The poet is horror-struck and disenchanted. Using very simple and short sentences the poem is very accessible such as the following phrases accede to: “clasping the dagger”, “man has become a prey”, “marauding beast”, “and deafening knocks”. What then does the poem demonstrate and instruct? The blacks are discriminated against, subjected to injustice, hardship and constant exasperation. Although they are in majority, they are always in receipt of white injustice:

I am the victim  
I am the slaughtered  
every night in the streets.  
I am cornered by the fear  
gnawing at my timid heart  
in my helplessness I languish . . .

The blacks are wallowing in poverty, hunger and fear while the white Lords who are on the benefiting side. They are ever ready to reduce the blacks to nothing. The whites have become beasts who hunt down their prey, “Man has ceased to be man/Man has become beast/ Man has become prey”. (Lines 16-18) With the use of metaphor, the poet describes the whites as “prowling beasts”, and the blacks as “cowering prey”.



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In 'Just a passerby', helplessness is every where, here, the poet's persona witnesses the killing of his brother and instead of calling a law enforcement agent, opts to go to church because he does not expect any help from south African law enforcement agency along side an attendant escapist attitude:

I saw them clobber him with kieres,  
I heard him scream with pain like a  
victim of slaughter,  
I smelt fresh blood gush  
From his nostrils,  
And flow on the street.

When told of his brother's death, he feigns ignorance and says rather that he went to church- which is a clear mark of helplessness and/or resigning to God for divine intervention, "Then she came in my woman neighbours/ "Have you heard"/ they have killed your brother / "O! No! I have not heard. / I went to church". (Lines, 16 – 19). This first stanza creates in the mind of the reader, an image of beastly humans that have no feelings in them. It portrays the whites as utterly cold-blooded while, the blacks are rendered vulnerable. The use of non-emotive language, the poet effectively conceals a great deal of his anger and hatred.

**Suppression and Subjugation**

This is another theme which many South African poets dwelt with in their works. The blacks were under constant check lest they tried to balk against the whites. One of such poems is Mtshali's "Nightfall in Soweto". In this poem, the blacks live in constant dread as the brutish law agencies bombed their privacy with spur-of-the-moment raids:

I tremble at his crunching footsteps  
I quake at his deafening knock at the door  
"Open up" he barks like a rabid dog,  
Thirsty for my blood..." (Sounds...).

These pictures of coercion and prejudice painted by the poets give the reader, a clear understanding of the predicament of the blacks in South Africa. It also helps to explain the poet's remarks, "I am a victim/I am slaughtered every night in the street." This poem shows blood flowing ceaselessly. This was the horrible picture the poet was impressing on the world to see, hear and condemn. He felt that the savage white law officers had become bestial. Helplessness was plain as the nose on your face in the black camp and in the poet's lines. Some critics still believe that Mtshali is a poet whose work one would like to read for its overpowering depiction of the scenes of brutalities, dehumanization and lack of independence, although it lacks the pungency of protest poetry.

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### Poetic Devices

Oswald Mtshali's poetic medium has exhibited a startling transition from the banal ends of simplicity to extreme militancy. He moved from being branded a conformist with weak-kneed resistance to what some described, "one of the new angry voices of black South Africa". The stylistic shift is evident in **Sounds of the Cowhide Drum** (1971) to **Fireflames** (1980).

The influence of oral tradition in Mtshali's work is to be expected, and as asserted somewhere, tradition played a vital role in the black poetry movement against apartheid. The poet has been aptly described in Mathew James's **Cry Rage** on metaphorical strings of animal imagery:

His voice, the voice of  
Birds: a robin heralding hope  
A nightingale lyrically lamenting pain  
An eagle emoting the people's Power.

In Mtshali's own words, creativity is said to "evolve emotive language through the use of creative skills that involve the muse", asserting further that "poetry has a whole range of presentation from the most militant and radical." Mtshali, (1991).

From the study here, it is clear that the poet uses simple diction, which clearly enhances the creation of mental pictures through a specialized deployment of figures of speech. In 'Nightfall in Soweto' and 'Just a passerby' he appears evasive and sarcastic. He evades direct encounter with the forces of injustice as he avoids name-calling and outright attack on the agents of oppression. In 'Nightfall in Soweto' he avoids direct attack on the racist government, as he chooses to blame nightfall for his woes. He uses vivid images of "death" and "blood" to enforce meaning. Rhetorical questions are also expertly employed in many of his poems especially those that convey a state of helplessness or escapism. His sarcasm, irony and humour are great assets he employs to carry the readers along.

### CONCLUSION

Oswald Mtshali has painted the dehumanization of the black man, in a very unique way. He has plucked from the lips of the suffering working class men and women, the agony of being menial workers. Having been a messenger in Soweto, obviously closer to the people to the agonies of the people as conveyed in his poem 'The Washer Woman'. He chronicles the worries of all the inhabitants, and identifies with the dilemma of the South African young mind cited in 'Boy on a Swing' (1971).

Mother!  
Where did I come from?  
When will I wear long trousers?

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Why was any father failed?

The beauty comes in the sharpness of his descriptive collection as one “quakes” at the deafening knocks and “trembles” at their crunching footsteps of the law officers. He is still a victim and an eye witness in the poem “Amagochuka at Gluencoe Station.” The growths of societal ills like prostitution are reported without actually caricaturing the culprit. The system that pushed her out seems to be in force here, “we’ll visit she beans/where a whore waits for a fee/to leave your balls burning with syphilitic fire”.

The wonder of it all is that Oswald Mtshali has participated, played his part in exposing man’s inhumanity to man in a state where a man is discriminated against deprived of all liberties, imprisoned and consequently sentenced to death for the colour of his skin. His survival in the iron-fisted regime as a writer, as well as the overthrow of the obnoxious policy, tells the story of his success. He has didactically pictured how the “villains” had lost all human qualities and as Rammpo Makhudu said, Mtshali’s effort at raising a fist against apartheid while he remained South Africa deserves commendation. His life and lines have witnessed tremendous transition, from a messenger caged in Soweto to a successful poet/ professor. The poet is indomitable and penetrating; the radical change between his first and second volumes of poems places him far above a mere chronicler of weak-kneed lethargies. However, **Sounds of a Cowhide Drum** is littered with what one can safely describe as lethargy, helpless, drunken, callous, and selfish features which does not auger well for such a serious situation.

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