

**Njabulo S. Ndebele &  
Antjie Krog**

Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele published the essay collections *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts About Our Country* (2007) and *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991), the novella *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003) and the award-winning *Fools and Other Stories* (1984).

Antjie Krog is an award-winning poet, translator and writer of nonfiction, as well as Professor in the Faculty of Arts at the University of the Western Cape. Email: akrog@uwc.ac.za

Interview

## A case for sheer compulsive and imaginative depth

*Professor Ndebele, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Could you please comment on Mofolo's style at the hand of this paragraph about the Deep Pool?*

Chaka o itlhatsoitse, eare ha a le lekhateng la ho qeta, tlopo ea hae ea thoenya-thoenya, ea ferre-ferella, letlalo la hloho le tlas'a eona la futhumala, la tsapola kapele-pele, ha ba ha phakisa ha khutsa, ha re tu. E ne e sa le hosasa-sasa, pele-pele ho letsatsi; 'me o ne a tolla bobeng, *moo* ho tšabehang haholo. Ka holimo ho *moo* a leng teng e le phororo e kholo, 'me tlas'a phororo eo, hona *moo* a leng teng, e le koeetsa ea tonana, thapolla e tšabehang, e tala-tala, e tebang haholo. Koeetseng eo metsi a le matšoana-tšoana a re tšo! (*Chaka* 23)

Chaka washed himself. It happened that, as he was about to finish, the tuft of hair on his head shivered and shook, and the skin under it felt warm and it rippled very quickly; and just as suddenly as it began, everything was quiet again, dead still. It was very early in the morning, long, long before the sun was due, and he was bathing in an ugly place, where it was most fearsome. High up from the place where he stood was a tremendous waterfall, and at the bottom of that waterfall, right by him, was an enormous pool, a frightening stretch of water, dark green in colour and very deep. In this pool the water was pitch dark, intensely black. (*Chaka* trans. Kunene 21)

The effect of the repetition *matšoana-tšoana a re tšo!* Ah! This is beautiful. It sounds delightfully beautifully written—its effect is emphatical—*tala* means green, *tala-tala* means it is green, deep green, real green, truest green. *Matšoana-tšoana*, from the stem *ntšo*, means dark, very dark water, with implications of endless depths. *Ka pele-pele*, fast-fast, quick. This pool, the moment he describes this, Mofolo in-

tensifies the setting, livens up its dimensions. And this is even before the King of the Deep appears. So the setting for something majestic to appear is created and mainly by the style.<sup>1</sup> Though repetition is a feature of Sesotho, Mofolo applies it in an unusual way—so as to find the word’s real and deepest meaning, as if the meaning is hidden within itself. Also the vocabulary—the water, the surroundings of the water, the vastness, the unknownness. And already the movement on the water suggests something enormous appearing, coming from the uncharted depths. And then somewhere among all of this vastness of nature is the boy Chaka, innocently washing himself, his mother hiding, his sudden awareness that something is beginning to happen and then his small hand moving to hold on to a little tuft of his hair.

*What about the word “ugly” as a description of the pool?*

I would say *bobeng* is used here more in the sense of ... not ugliness, but danger. Danger of depth, a dangerous setting. *Bobeng* as ugly is perhaps too literal for my taste, because *bobe* is indeed ugliness, but it is not the ugliness of something as a value judgement. My sense of it is danger. I think *bobeng haholo* means an unfathomable danger rather than a judgement about the appearance of the place.

*Can you comment on the style of the following extract?*

Chaka, mohla a tlohang hae ha a baleha, o tlohile e le Chaka, e le motho ea joale ka batho bohle, ea nang le mefokolo ea botho; kajeno o khutla a fetohile hampe; ho khutla nama feela, bokantle, ha e le boena bo setse moo a tsoang teng; o khutla ka moea osele le ka botho bosele. (51)

Chaka, the day he left home in flight, he left as Chaka, a human being like all other human beings who had human failings. Today he comes back greatly changed; it is only his flesh that is coming back, only his outer self; as for his true self, that has remained at the place from which he is returning; he comes back with a completely different spirit and a different personality. (47)

This is spectacularly phrased with an impressive psychological insight. And again the repetition! He meets Isanusi and the core of his being dies. He left as Chaka, but then only his flesh comes back; only his outer self; his true self has departed. But see how Mofolo insists that his descent was not from the position of a perfect being—he is someone who has failures. And then the loosening begins. I agree with Kunene that his meeting with Isanusi is the critical point in the novel, from a plot point of view: a choice-making moment. As a novelist he knows this choice leads

to its consequences. Chaka chooses to kill. And the fact of wanting more and more and more power is a factor of the consequences of the choice in which you've given everything of yourself to that choice. You were lured into that, "lured" is the word, he was pulled into that choice and sank into its depths. As a consequence he lost all the other facets of himself. The novel explores the implications of total choice and being lured into the benefits of that choice along the way until it burns you out. It may have something to do with Christianity—that is one interpretation. There may be others. In my view, Mofolo contemplates the human condition. Where are we today? What choices do we make in 2015? I see a lot of people who have followed the path of being lured and keep going along the path of unpalatable choices.

*When did you first come across Mofolo's work?*

I read the book, the Dutton translation, in my undergraduate days. I bumped into one day while browsing through the university library (which was later to be named Thomas Mofolo University Library) at the Roma campus of the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland (UBLS).<sup>2</sup> I had then also just read Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* which was prescribed for us. So when I read the Dutton translation of Mofolo's *Chaka*—about the circumstances of Chaka's birth, his difficult upbringing, his subsequent, all-consuming vengeance, accentuated by his meeting with Isanusi and his choice of a life of killing, which reached its highest destructive power after he seems to lose his mind after the death of his mother Nandi—I recognized the resonances with the tragedy of Faustus who gains all the power in the world, but loses his soul, considered to be the most precious attribute of human life. What I found to my pleasure in the Dutton translation were imaginative, artistic resonances with Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. But Mofolo's artistic devices were more familiar in an affirming kind of way. Even as a township boy in Charterston Location, Nigel, I came across numerous, frightening stories of a gigantic snake that lived in the bottomless depths of rivers or lakes; of how sometimes it came out as a tornado to wreak havoc; how it needed to be appeased through customary rituals. In this way, the mythical elements in Marlowe's drama stood in a relationship of comparative, if mutual, imaginative reinforcement with Mofolo's fiction. It seemed to me that Mofolo's artistic achievement scaled the same heights as Shakespeare's. Later when I read Dostoyevsky, Homer, even the epics such as *Sundiata*, I would feel the same about Mofolo's achievement in *Chaka*. It made me feel culturally grounded in my own universe as an African in ways I never experienced before. Against Africa's colonial history, here was a work that resonated with and even artistically overshadowed a western text (*Doctor Faustus*) and scaled the same heights as some of those considered among the world's best.

*Can you expand a little on what you mean by “overshadowed”? And what question is Mofolo asking?*

The imaginative depth in the exploration of a descent into hell, a moral hell. I think *Chaka* went further than Marlowe in depicting that descent. I don't even know whether Mofolo is asking a question. I think he was a writer who was fascinated by a drama that he captured partly through his research. He travelled and did research and then gave it an artistic and aesthetic expression where you, the reader, have to find resonances within it that make sense to you. I never got the sense that Mofolo was preaching about bad traditional customs or evil in the Christian sense—I never got that. It's like *Moby Dick*—the novel about the whale—the supernatural element simply deepens the profoundness of the falling. My familiarity with the culture in the text made the universal theme resonate within me more profoundly.

Sometime after reading *Chaka*, I bumped into a copy of a French play also called *Chaka* in the same Lesotho University library, written by a French speaking African dramatist, and it gave me a sense of just how much the book moved across the continent.<sup>3</sup> I like to believe that what I found is probably what Senghor and Césaire found: here was something grounded in our myths, universal *and* authentically ours. I remember wanting to do a biography on Mofolo once, but in the end never got round to it.

*There have been sentiments expressed, even at our conference, that Mofolo was deliberately “anti-Zulu”. Would you agree?*

No, I would disagree fiercely! Certain depictions of human reality are not logically judgemental, but they can be morally so. In other words a real person is being looked at, but from the point of view, not of condemnation, but of what lessons about the human condition they offer to you. I like to think that some of the criticism about an anti-Nguni perspective is driven from a Zulu nationalistic sentiment that is embarrassed by a morally unflattering artistic depiction of a historical figure idealised by nationalistic sentiment. A similar observation can be made about Christian readings of Mofolo's *Chaka*. For me Mofolo's *Chaka* is not necessarily value laden with Christian readings of Chaka's descent into hell (although such a reading is most probable). It is really that in my view, Mofolo's rendering of Chaka leaps away from simple moral judgement towards a profound contemplation of good and evil with an imaginative force that puts him in a category of few writers in the world.

*His using Shaka is like your using Winnie Mandela?<sup>4</sup>*

That's right. The conundrum of being human! There are situations in which you may draw moral and ethical judgement. But in the end, what Mofolo does through the power

of his imagination is to expose us to human experience that is as powerful and as mysterious as the force of gravity, the flashes of lightning that make you ponder existence deeply.<sup>5</sup> You keep going back to it—awed by the complexity of the human being. It is true, you might garner some lessons. But the total aesthetic experience might push you beyond the utilities of lessons towards an affirming sense of being present in the world while being vulnerable to never knowing entirely, yet sensing the possibility of that knowledge without ever getting to it. This is where reading *Chaka* always take me to.

*Is it more an honouring?*

No, plumbing the depths, is more like it. The word “honouring” may already be a judgement which is not necessarily intended by the author. You may take a position from the perspective of which your own view has to be understood. By the same token, what you see as honouring, another might see as condemnation. I would rather say that Mofolo was fascinated by the story of a king who was born under problematic circumstances. In this connection there are many stories in the *litsomo* of badly treated orphans, born out of wedlock, countless stories, reminding me also of Cinderella in the Western tradition. All cultures have it: what do you do with the person who grows up under alienating circumstances where the person is disliked, is not wanted? He grows up to avenge his ill treatment, but crosses the critical boundary of balance. It destroys him as much as it destroys others.

Mofolo heard about Chaka, and as a writer must have been fascinated by the rising from circumstances of deprivation, hate, loneliness.<sup>6</sup> In a sense from a storytelling trajectory, there is also the element of prediction in stories, of prohibition. A character is warned not to do something. Consequences of ignoring the warning are seldom spelt out. Almost invariably, the character ignores the prohibition, and adverse consequences follow. Chaka is given a choice between medicine that heals and one which kills. He chooses the latter: the path of vengeance. He chooses the path of unbridled power and its capacity to destroy. It destroys him too. The moth flies into the attractive flame and is consumed. In similar fashion, Macbeth is driven by ambition and the quest for power, and is consumed by his deed of murder.

There is another example, Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*: I can kill an old woman, she is nothing, but then that old woman looms large in his imagination, comes back to haunt him. All these characters—Chaka, Macbeth, Raskolnikov—become consumed by their murderous acts. There are all these examples so that actually when I am a Zulu (remember I am also a Mosotho because I spent so much time in Lesotho) I think Zulus would read a translation of *Chaka* in Zulu and say: Wow, it is beautiful! That this great king of ours was interpreted in this way—through a story! What we have is a tragedy in the most classical sense. A great person who gets lost in his own greatness and then dies in the end and everything just falls apart.

*Like the works of Shakespeare about the British kings?*

It's the way of life. You put away the nationalistic sentiment about being Zulu and thinking this is my king, and you respond to the resonances of the story with such power, which tells you more, not about your king but about yourself, the human condition. This is what I lived with from the time I have read it. You know, really, if Mofolo's intention was to write a story in order to propagate ethnic and Christian ideological sentiments, one has to admit: then the story brilliantly defeated him! The story went on its own. The story perhaps set him free.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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#### **Notes**

1. For a comprehensive analysis of Mofolo's style, especially the vivid role of various kinds of repetition, see Daniel P. Kunene (198–231).
2. Ndebele refers to the "literary genius of Mofolo" in *Fine Lines from the Box* (32), and mentions in *The Rediscovery of the Ordinary* that he thinks of Mofolo and writers such as Jordan, Mhpahlele, Dikobe, etc. "as philosophers, asking ultimate questions about life, moral values and social being" (Ndebele 26).
3. Probably Seydou Badian Koyaté's *La mort de Chaka* (1961).
4. It is interesting to note that Ndebele, in a strange coincidence, had to deal with the same kinds of questions in terms of style and the use of a real person in *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Publishers in the USA wanted to publish the manuscript, but could not work out under what genre it should be classified for selling purposes. In his foreword to the new edition he says: "I had not written a biography. It was a fictional interpretation of a life, not the life itself. [...] [I]t was important for me to retain the speculative value of the narrative without any part of it claiming accreditation external to the narrative, thus curtailing its imaginative freedom" (xxix). He adds: "The challenge of art in such circumstances is to search for the formulations of myth, and to pose dilemma, in laying out the difficult human choices in the public domain; to sensitise that domain by exposing the moral choices to be made or avoided and to ponder the consequences of those choices" (xxxvii). Ndebele regards the "transgressions of borders between literary genres [...] [as] analogous to transgressions of borders between races, ethnicities social classes and geographical spaces". He believes that these transgressions may prompt "new ways of experiencing community" (xxiii–xxiv).
5. In the foreword Ndebele explains how he wrestled in finding ways to keep an effective distance from the living persona of his protagonist in order to effectively imagine her: "My decision not to interview Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was a first-order distancing effect. It underscored my project as fundamentally artistic, not biographical. It assured me total control over my creative space. It was a necessity that demanded that I impose vigilance over myself [...] the public domain was the source of all the information I needed" (xiii). At the launch of Ndebele's book the evening at Exclusive Books, somebody called him with the words: "Mummy is here" suggesting Winnie Mandela herself arrived unexpectedly. Ndebele writes: "By allowing myself to be swept into the usage of the word 'Mummy' [...] I would unwittingly confirm my membership of a community in which that name resonated with a great deal of shared knowledge, expectations and conduct. [...] There was a kind of social knowledge, and the behaviour it engendered, in which admiration for a public figure easily turned into adoration, and such adoration became a soft mechanism by which those caught in the momentum of adoration were enticed into a trap [...] in that way humans often worshipped another of their kind. In that way humans created in others their own domineering monsters [...] people then get caught in a culture of unthinking. They yield to the perceived rewards of membership" (xi). He concludes, "If she was 'Mummy' to him (the messenger), she was Winnie Mandela to me" (xii).
6. In the introduction to the new edition, Ndebele describes how he was listening to an SABC broadcast at a party in Lesotho in which respectable leaders of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) were

publically condemning and distancing themselves from the actions of Winnie Mandela and her infamous Mandela Football Club. "[A]s the broadcast sunk in and was absorbed by the party-goers and I, I remember feeling angry: how could they do this to her? I remember my intuitions stretching out across the distances to wherever she was, sensing the unfathomable loneliness of Winnie Mandela" (xx).

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