

# Resistance Poetry in Post-apartheid South Africa: An Analysis of the Poetic Works and Cultural Activism of Vonani Bila

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## Abstract

The article explores selected works of Vonani Bila, one of the most influential wordsmiths of post-apartheid South Africa. It outlines the difference between “protest poetry” and “resistance poetry”, and contextualises the contemporary expression(s) of the latter within today’s South Africa’s poetry scene. Focusing on Bila’s “politically engaged” poems and cultural activism, this article maintains that resistance poetry has re-invented itself in the post-94 cultural scenario, and still represents a valid tool in the hands of poets to creatively expose and criticize the enduring contradictions of South African society.

## Introduction

Stories, legends, myths, narratives, dramatisations in the form of oral poetic modes of languages have been produced in all societies from the very earliest times. In the South(ern) African context, traditional oral poetry (*izibongo, dithoko, difela, diboko*, etc.) was tied to specific social events, and performed mainly during certain special occasions of celebration, mourning or other relevant moments in the life of the community. Such oral performances were indeed included within larger public rituals, quite unlike the generally solitary books of modern literature. The intrusion of European culture in the African imaginary landscape forced tradition and modernity (i.e. orality and literacy) to compete for space and attention within the local communities, and the features of oral performance started to be modified by the complexities of a fast-changing, challenging context. With the Damocles sword of apartheid lurking upon the heads of millions of Africans forced to “migrate” from their “homelands” to the industrial districts, oral poetry moved out of the rural villages to make its appearance on the streets of rapidly urbanising twentieth

century South Africa. It was in the hostile (though “stories-dripping”) urban arena of the townships, where black people battled for daily survival but also to defeat apartheid, that the well-known soul-moving power of oral poetry started to be utilised by artists as a potent tool to mobilise the black masses against the heinous racist system set up by their oppressors. Magisterially interpreting Biko’s liberating lessons, the oral performances of poets and dramatists such as, amongst others, Ingoapele Madingoane, Mongane Serote, Siphso Sephamla, Lindiwe Mabuzza, Oswald Joseph Mtshali, Don Mattera, Lefifi Tladi and Matsimela Manaka, started to catalyse the attention of people on the injustices of the system, as well as – more importantly – on the relevance and richness of their African roots and history. With their public performances these artists channelled the castrating feelings of frustration and anger of black communities into more productive sentiments of self-esteem and self-emancipation. Their poems, plays and chants were always performed to an audience.

In order to disclose the roots of the contemporary genre called “spoken-word poetry” (of which Vonani Bila, the poet under scrutiny in this article, is a dazzling interpreter), it is necessary to highlight the links existing between the current expressions of performance poetry and older oral poetic cultures. The following paragraphs summon the heritage that comes from a specific group of artists who are considered by most wordsmiths of today as the forefathers of spoken-word poetry: the so-called “Soweto poets”.

### **Spoken-word Poetry and the Legacy of the “Soweto Poets”**

Although the political landscape has changed radically since 1994, the agenda of the “Soweto poets” (Chapman, 1982)<sup>i</sup> and that of the post-apartheid spoken-word poets tends, in many ways, to converge. The presence of a thread which unites old and new experiences of ‘resistance poetry’ can at first sight appear quite surprising. It is not surprising, though, once one has scratched the surface of mass media propaganda and analysed the present socio-economic conditions in which vast majority of black South Africans (and the migrants) continue to live. The similarities between the two poetry movements are staggering, and can be summed up as follows:

- from a sociological point of view, Chapman argues that Soweto poetry was “the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies in South Africa” (Chapman, 1982: 11). The same definition can be applied to the spoken-word movement in the new millennium.

- stylistically and linguistically Soweto poetry “[...] generally adopted a stark English idiom and a ghetto-derived imagery, and which has eschewed rhyme and closed forms in favour of ‘open’ and naked forms” (Chapman *ibid.*).

Apart from the strong impact that rhymed hip hop texts have on spoken word poetry, it is legitimate to maintain that these stylistic features correspond to those one finds in the works of the vast majority of today’s wordsmiths. From the perspectives of potential audiences, Chapman draws out an analysis of the historical passage from ‘protest’ to ‘resistance’ poetry which happened in the mid-1970s. In his reconstruction of the different phases of the Soweto poetry movement, he contends that “initially Soweto poetry was directed in protest at a predominantly white liberal readership” (Chapman *ibid.*).

As Louw’s (2007: 72) study demonstrates, South Africa’s mainstream publishing industry targets white, middle to upper class readers. Aware of this claustrophobic situation, spoken-word poets frequent more and more grassroots, independent publishing houses such as Geko, Timbila Poetry Project, Modjaji Books, Dye Hard Press and Deep South<sup>ii</sup> to diffuse their works. Other spoken-word poets like Napo Masheane, Phillipa Yaa de Villiers, and Lebogang Mashile have instead opted for self-publication. Countless wordsmiths are publishing their works on websites, blogs, and online literary magazines. Although some spoken-word poets have managed to carve a niche for themselves within the national editorial “big business” (Molebatsi with Penguin South Africa, Bila, Xaba, and Mokhosi with the UKZN Press), the list of wordsmiths who prefer not to negotiate their creative freedom with the owners of the mainstream publishing market is growing by the day. Furthermore, by opting for live performances (instead of necessarily looking for paper-based renditions of their work), spoken word artists circumvent *ab origine* any (potentially) problematic interaction with (potentially) unsympathetic editors and publishers. Such a practice has indeed allowed them to freely express and develop a poetics of resistance (rather than ‘protest’) which, as this article will later discuss, is deeply rooted in the Black Consciousness philosophy theorised by thinkers such as Steven Bantu Biko and Ongopotse Tiro, among others. This is another point young wordsmiths have in common with the “Soweto poets”. As Chapman (1982:13) explains with regards to the shift from ‘protest’ to ‘resistance’ which took place in the poetry language of the 1970s:

By the mid-seventies [...] the emphasis shifted with Serote’s Black Consciousness voice (predictably less popular with the whites) *finding its full power in an uncompromising poetry of resistance*. This is a mobilizing rhetoric utilizing epic

forms (in a highly contemporary, almost Brechtian sense) and traditional African oral techniques of repetition, parallelism and ideophones. *By these means the poet seeks to impart to a black communal audience, often in a context of performance, a message of conscious-raising [...] pride.*

(Emphasis added by author)

This digression on the constraints of South Africa's literary market aims at contextualising the literary figure of Vonani Bila who, apart from being a charismatic performer, is the coordinator and editor-in-chief of Timbila Poetry Project, an editorial platform created with the specific purpose of offering emerging voices of the country a space for self-expression, to be articulated in a literary arena alternative to those offered by the corporate-driven cultural industry of today's South Africa. An analysis of his works and his multiple activities as a poet, editor and cultural activist are the subjects of discussions of the paragraphs that follow.

### **Vonani Bila: Mzansi's Twenty-first Century "People's poet"**

South African spoken-word poets have been capable of retaining the magic of African storytelling to this day by reinterpreting and fusing preceding oral poetic traditions (both local and imported), and reformulating this new, syncretic poetic language within the modes of global communication. They are disseminating their works in a vast array of public platforms, thus weaving their stories, literary aesthetics, and political consciousness into the social, historical, folkloric, and mythological fabric of the country. South African spoken-word poetry is therefore the offspring of the cross-pollination of different sub-genres (rap poetry, lyrical poetry, praise poetry, dub poetry, slam poetry, resistance poetry, Harlem Renaissance poetry, beat poetry, *inter alia*), and a performance-oriented kind of poetry that does not only reside on the written page. Often set to music, it is conceived to be performed in front of an audience, and continues to live as a sort of sacred sound in the everyday and special events of the urban community.

When, in 1994, the *ancien régime* eventually collapsed and the new dispensation got rid of the demon of censorship, South Africans experienced an excitement of spirit and an explosion of creativity never known in the previous decades. In those years, South Africa started to witness the rise of a new generation of performing poets who began to bring on stage the effervescent spirit of a crawling nation. Quite unexpectedly though, instead of being articulated through praises and panegyrics for the new ruling class, the poetry of the young poets started to manifest itself as a powerful tool to criticise what in a very short period of time started to be seen as the 'new power

elite' (Bond, 2000; 2004). In the post-independence climate of general euphoria, spoken-word poetry appeared to be one of the most unapologetic voices against the overrated 'rainbow nation' discourse and its perverted political and cultural attachments. A return to 'resistance poetry' was as much an expression of this reaction as the sudden preoccupations by artists and activists ("the new social movements") with broader issues like, amongst others, the role of the New South Africa in a globalising world. The swinging moods of South Africa's youth came to find expression in the various modes of speech which form the mosaic of the versatile art of spoken word. Pivotal figures of the poetry scene(s) of the 1990s were artists such as Kgafela Magogodi and Lesego Rampolokeng, followed a few years later by Vonani Bila and by two all-female spoken-word collectives, the Johannesburg-based Feela Sistah! and the Cape Town-based WEAVE. One common trait in the works of all these artists is that, although articulated in different forms, they all display precise political standpoints.

One of Bila's trademark poems, "Mr President Let the Babies Die", is quoted in *Talk Left, Walk Right. South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms* (Bond, 2004). This work, suggestively enough when one consider the public profile of the poet, is not a collection of poetry, but an essay on neoliberal politics in the 'New South Africa'. At the very heart of his merciless examination of the post-apartheid politics, Bond places Bila's strident critique to former President Thabo Mbeki, excerpts of which are quoted below:

The fat men in parliament sleep in broad daylight.  
They have lost the dream to free the starving bellies of the masses  
[...]  
Don't inconvenience Mr President.  
He's got an important meeting in Washington DC.  
Buy him houses in all cities of the world.  
Don't forget to buy him a private jet, a balloon.  
He'll jump, clad and stomp like a well-fed baboon.  
[...]  
We did not know you befriended Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher  
We strummed guitars when prisoners walked free –  
We did not know the mind got frozen in prison winter (Bond, 2004: 237)

One peculiarity about Bila is that he is based at Elim Hospital (in the Limpopo province), the community he is active in, and from which he successfully runs Timbila Poetry Project and its namesake publishing house. Far from regarding this factor as a limitation to his poetic and political activity, it nevertheless locates him somehow ‘outside’ the ‘inner circle’ of the spoken-word movement, whose centres of gravity lie around the big metropolitan areas (Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban). Nonetheless, if “physically” Bila has positioned himself on the ‘periphery’ of South Africa’s cultural industry, intellectually, artistically and politically his voice has been a central one in the development of the post-apartheid poetry (Macdonald, 2010:89–114). Agreeably, Berold underlines how the publication of Bila’s poem ‘Comrades Don’t We Delude Ourselves’ (Bila, 1997:69–73), represents a cornerstone in the history of post-apartheid ‘resistance’ poetry (Berold, 2003:155). Although the ‘overtly political’ issues stand at the core of Bila’s prolific poetic production, various other themes are dealt with in his three collections of poetry (Bila, 2004; 2006; 2007). The paragraphs below provide a critical outline of some of the poems included in *Handsome Jita*, and attempt at contextualising the role of resistance poets (epitomized by Bila) in the cultural-political scenario of the nation.

### **The Impact of Resistance Poetry in the New South Africa**

The distinction between ‘protest’ and ‘resistance’ poetry produced under apartheid has been debated at length by scholars who have scrutinised the poems published during that historical period (Mzamane, 1983; Chapman, Gardner & Mphahlele, 1992; Mashigo 1996; Switzer & Adhikari, 2000). However, this article directs its gaze towards the resistance poetry *of post-94*, as it manifests itself in the verses of Vonani Bila: because of this shift of focus, the analysis offered in the next section of this article does not engage with the works of the authors above cited (although they constitute the theoretical backdrop for any analysis on ‘protest’ and ‘resistance’ poetry in South Africa), and is centred almost exclusively on the seminal paper on post-apartheid resistance poetry delivered by Mda in his 2001 Biko Memorial Lecture (Mda, 2009:21–39).

In his speech, Mda praises post-apartheid young performing artists: supported by his long-standing field activity with the spoken-word poets of South Africa, Mda’s meditated reflection on the status of contemporary performance poetry reflects the author’s understanding of what is happening nowadays on the vibrant streets of the country. He underlines how these young poets operate in a fluid artistic and political space that they have carved out of the dissatisfaction

towards the (generally) decadent mainstream arena of popular culture. The utmost objective of these spoken-word poets is that of inspiring “[...] young people through art, and to motivate them to greater heights of creativity through the success of peer-role models, with the view of creating a positive and productive youth community” (Mda, 2009:22). Recalling Chapman’s definition, Mda renames the poetic style of these young resistance poets ‘consciousness-raising poetry’ (Mda, 2009:22). This brilliant definition recalls the centrality of Biko’s philosophy in spoken-word poetry, but it also includes an explicit reference to the core mission of the movement of young wordsmiths, which is nothing but the elevation of the readers/listeners’ self-awareness through ‘conscious’ art.

Mda refers to poets like Lebogang Mashile and other popular wordsmiths, MCs and rappers from the underground world of “street poetry”. Nevertheless, the pertinent considerations put forward in the passage cited above can fit nicely to Bila’s poetry and grassroots activity as an editor and publisher. As previously mentioned, Bila is the founder and the coordinator of the Timbila Poetry Project, a well-known and highly respected cultural platform which in recent years has served as a centre of aggregation for some of the most inspired (and inspiring) new poetic voices of the country. Timbila Poetry Project is a flexible networking organisation with ramifications in other South African cities<sup>iii</sup>, whose objective it to offer visibility to young poets and artists who operate outside the ‘official circuits’ of ‘high culture’. This working group has facilitated a called-for process of agglutination of the scattered voices that resonate in the underground circles of South Africa via the organisation of live poetry sessions and workshops, and the publication of poetry volumes and several issues of *Timbila. A Journal of Onion Skin Poetry*. The biggest merit of Bila and the other members of the board of Timbila Poetry Project is the creation of a stable, easy-to-recognise space, which represents a tangible sublimation of what happens, in a smaller scale, in uncountable unspotted corners of the country. Unsurprisingly, Timbila Poetry Project is one of the undisputed points of references for many young South African poets. A substantial part of its success is due to the fact that it manifests all the positive elements of self-organisation, self-publication and – ultimately – self-empowerment, identified by Mda as the most fascinating and liberating aspects of the spoken word movement:

At their own volition and expense, young people come together to create community dialogue on issues that concern them most. [...] the whole movement is not institutional. It is a cultural and

political re-awakening of those who have been consigned to the ditches of a lost generation, who are now pulling themselves out, quite mercilessly, by the scruff of their necks (Mda, 2009:23)

Mda suitably maintains that the emancipating power of self-organisation transcends the boundaries of direct political action, to positively affect and influence the poets' own self-esteem and the same perception they have of their own pro-active role within a fast-changing society. With regards to this he (Mda 2009: 26) adds:

[Young wordsmiths] are the true heirs of Biko [...] not only have these young people taken practical steps to inject consciousness into their lives through their art, to use culture to create a critical awareness of their situation and to mobilise themselves to action, but questions of self-esteem, self-reliance and self-development form the foundation of their philosophy. They have come to the conclusion that culture is the central tool for domination and must therefore be resisted by an alternative culture. Using their art as a tool of analysing their society, they are rewriting the script of their lives in a manner that defies their imposed identity of a lost generation. The various excluded South African groups can rewrite the script of their community too if they embrace the ethos of self-development that has not been imposed from above by so-called experts. It emanates from the community itself after the community has been equipped with the tools of critically analysing their society, engaging in a dialogue about their needs, and then adopting resolutions on what route to take to solve their problems

Bila personifies the profile of conscious poet honoured by Mda. Faithful to Biko's timeless teaching, he has positioned culture at the very core of the struggle for emancipation in neoliberal post-apartheid South Africa. More importantly, he has clearly understood that if the conscientisation of the youth is the main objective of the artists engaged in the new liberation struggle, and culture the best (or only?) means at oppressed people's disposal to achieve it, performance poetry is the language through which such conscientisation can be most effectively brought forward.

This article argues that Bila's *oeuvre* is a contemporary expression of resistance poetry, since one of its most visible traits is the defiant critique of both local and global power elites. The message of the abovementioned poem "Mr President Let the Babies Die" can be easily grasped by the reader without recurring to the obscure hermeneutic explanations: the nuanced depiction of subjects, tones and atmospheres are deliberately replaced by an unmistakably provocative and straightforward prosaicism depicting familiar images of specific targets (i.e. a corrupted politician and his questionable *modus operandi*). The directedness of Bila's verses is the most striking characteristic of his poetry, one that boastfully comes to surface thanks to the immediateness of



its language. By paying a closer look at Bila's narrative, though, one is driven to the conclusion that his words represent the articulation of a much more complex and refined poetics.

Ndebele is one of the scholars who have deciphered the apparently sophistic difference between 'protest' and 'resistance' in a postcolonial literary context, as he poignantly set out the sterility of the fundamentally liberal idea of protest applied to literature (Ndebele, 2006). Mda seems to subscribe to Ndebele's point of view, as they both insist on the necessity for the writers who aim at producing truly emancipating works of art to focus on instances of 'resistance' rather than 'protest'. In his examination on the history of popular theatre during apartheid, Mda explains the crucial dissimilarities existing between the two philosophical approaches to politically-oriented performance art, embodied on one side (resistance) in the works of Matsimele Manaka and Maishe Maponya, and on the other side (protest) in the plays of Athol Fugard and Gibson Kente:

[P]rotest literature made a statement of disapproval, but did not go beyond that. It addressed itself to the oppressor, with the view of appealing to his conscience. It was therefore a theatre of complaint, of weeping and self-pity. It did not offer any solution beyond the depiction of the inhumanity of the system on passive victims [...] Black consciousness was a philosophy of resistance rather than of protest. With it came a generation of theatre practitioners [...] who created work that went *beyond protest*. This new theatre of resistance no longer placed the onus on the oppressed to prove their humanity. It no longer attempted to appeal to the conscience of the oppressor. It addressed itself directly to the oppressed. Not only did this new militant theatre propagate messages of liberation, it agitated for action on the part of the oppressed to change their own situation (Mda, 2009:25, my italics).

This distinction is particularly useful in drawing out the true essence of Bila's poetry. According to Mda's view, the quintessential difference between 'protest' and 'resistance' art lies in the degree of personal involvement of the artist within the oppressed communities s/he addresses. Protest poets speak from a distanced, comfortable position of safety, and in doing so they remain materially and physically detached from the everyday problems of the people they claim to speak for. On the other hand, the experience of a resistance poet such as Bila is deeply rooted in his community, and his poetry is the true expression and reflection of a systematic personal engagement with the everyday issues of survival of the community itself. While protest poets believe in a top-down driven resolution of conflicts via a gradual moral regeneration of the ruling oppressors, the resistance poet focuses on the grassroots radical instances of self-emancipation that black people have elaborated during centuries of oppression, and identify these instances as the most effective way to rapidly overcome an unsustainable status quo. Observed under this lens, Bila's poetry is an unwavering example of post-94 resistance poetry. His stinging words have no

interest in awakening the new oppressors' compassion. For him, trying to engage with the country's rulers is a useless (or even dangerous) political strategy. Rather, he calls for an immediate, collective arousing of the poor masses of the New South Africa who, after almost 20 years of neocolonial order, still fail to notice the unreliability of the current dispensation. Bila's poetry envisages a self-mobilization of the masses to be advanced without interacting with the political class<sup>iv</sup>.

Mda's eye has scouted out this poetics of resistance at play in the words of South Africa's young wordsmiths: his words capture the feeling of abnegation of a generation of young artists committed to the transformation of the unjust and unequal society they live and operate in. According to him they are some of the few 'watchdogs' left in circulation, in the current age of widespread uncritical alignment to the "corrupt buffoons" (Mda, 2009:29) of the ANC elite:

One senses strong disillusionment with politicians among young South Africans [...] and here I am not talking of the white youth who believe affirmative action has rendered their future meaningless in this country. I am talking of young black South Africans in the rural areas and marginalised urban ghettos who see, rightly or wrongly, only bleakness in their future and blame politicians for betraying them. You hear it in their songs and in their poetry – works of art that are irreverent and have the potency of crushing political egos. This is a good sign. It augurs well for the future of South Africa because post-colonial Africa (or neo-colonial Africa, if you like) has not been known for its vigilance against the excesses of its political leaders (Mda, 2009:28)

In many ways Bila incarnates the prototype of the "art-ctivist" depicted by Mda. He is the epitome of those young artists who Mda has called "Biko's children – the young men and women from marginalised communities who are using their arts to understand the nature of oppression (which includes the sources of poverty) and to liberate themselves from it" (Mda, 2009:36). These children of Biko are "catalyst[s] for a people-centre development" (Mda, 2009:37), which is founded on the far-reaching power of art. With their poems and songs they have taken "*practical steps* to transform society at the very grassroots level" (Mda, 2009:37, emphasis added by the author) without relying on the political class, but rather by openly denouncing its corruption. Bila's poetry is a contemporary adaptation of the "poetry of resistance" which sprang out of the works of the "Soweto poets" of the 1970s/1980s. The way his poetics of resistance unfolds in his poems is the topic of the sub-section ahead.

## The Themes and Tones of Vonani Bila's Poetry

In his finely tuned foreword to Bila's *Handsome Jita*, Waller stresses the accent on the versatility of Bila's writing, but also on his unapologetically explicit style as a public performer (Bila 2007: vii-ix). This double, complementary dimension of Bila's poetry is the key of the success of an artist whose uncompromising voice resonates loud and clear in both international stages and the local communities.

The deeply felt sense of belonging to his own community is the emblem of Bila's poetic production. In this sense, he embodies the 'traditional' African poet fully immersed in the quotidian flow of life, as opposed to the Romantic idea of the aloof poet detached from his surroundings. With regards to the difference between the social, cultural and political role exercised by 'traditional' and 'modern' (in academic terms) poets, Sardinian performing poet Alberto Masala<sup>v</sup> (2005:16) states:

Western culture has turned the figure of the poet upside down, making it functional to a philosophy of absence, of abstraction, of enlightened illumination, of inoffensive presence [...] Amongst the people who still know how to listen, the opposite happens. For them poetry is congenital, necessary and connatural, socially indispensable. For them the poet, thanks to the acknowledgment of the community, is invested with a representative function. Through songs, he personifies his people, he tells their mythical and quotidian epopees [...] but, above all, he is the living link to the inexpressible, the mystery, the vision [...] he is invited to sing only if the community acknowledges his ability to 'see beyond' and if he is able to depict this 'beyond' [...] Nobody can call himself a poet: it is those who listen to him who will nominate him so, who will grant him quality and authority; and they are the same ones who will revoke this title if he is not able to honour it (translation provided by the author).

The quintessence of Bila's work is the impact it has over non-literary audiences. The tribute poem "Dennis on the march" dedicated to late poet, educator, fellow activist and friend Dennis Brutus<sup>vi</sup>, adequately sums up the characteristics of the physical, intellectual and political space in which Bila (following the trail traced by Brutus) positions himself as a wordsmith:

blade-sharp revolutionary  
you march in step  
alongside the landless peasants  
the evicted & the unemployed  
you march alongside the students

& the hiv-positive  
you march  
alongside the harangued retrenched workers  
& climb over hills of working-class tribulations  
ask why in the periphery of cities  
of the new south africa  
filthy shack tin-roofed camps grow  
along modern throughways  
& drifting highways (Bila, 2007:42–43)

The appreciation that the ‘marginal subjects’ listed in the above excerpt display for Bila’s public performances in rallies, marches and other gatherings all over the world, happens because his poetry is highly passionate, and capable of generating sublime and defamiliarising feelings of admiration and shock in readers/listeners. For Bila all aspects of everyday life in post-apartheid South Africa are a field for discussion, and his method is a poetic rendition of the sense of disillusion of the average black citizen. Yet, his poetry is not a manifestation of fruitless anger: it is a call to action, an invitation to re-act to injustices, to get together, to love and respect one’s self and one’s associates, in order to restore the lost harmony within the communities. Therefore what springs out from Bila’s engaged (and sometimes enraged) pen is a strong feeling of love for those who form part of his (g)local community. In his view no force actually empowers the mind of all its potentiality of acting and reasoning as love. As advocated by hip hop culture, loving one’s community, and working for its collective wealth is the ultimate moral guideline of any conscious artist. Due to the historical framework today’s wordsmith operate in, this attitude often puts the artist in collision with politicians who, on the contrary, more often than not work only to secure their own personal wealth, and in doing so they significantly contribute to the material and spiritual impoverishment of the communities they are supposed to ‘govern’. But, as much as most people are pleased to believe so, politicians are not the only subjects to be blamed for the material and moral squalor that in many circumstances affects the everyday life in the poorest communities. Bila is aware of the fact that it is the very people living around him who frequently contribute to reproduce (consciously or not) the social problems in the historically disadvantaged communities. As Motsemme has subtly exposed, living in communities troubled by a whole set of inter-related structural problems fuels the rise of self-destructive subcultures permeated by a

(subconscious) hatred towards oneself and the rest of the membership of the community (Motsemme, 2007). This sad truth puts those (like poets) who are particularly sensitive to the dilemmas of their environments, in the position to critically address the ‘unconscious’ behaviour of the individuals who play a significant part in the reproduction of community-breaking sub-cultures and practices, thus destroying the fragile sense of belonging to a shared space in which people respect and support each other (as denounced in Bila’s accusatory poem “Mpho”). In “Mmbengwa” Bila deploras how the feelings of carelessness, mistrust and indifference performed against the marginal(ised) members of society are as perilous and destructive for the survival of the community as the arrogance and corruption of politicians. This touching poem tells the story of a mentally-disturbed street beggar, who is detested and eventually left behind by the same members of his community:

Mmbengwa

[...]

his tanned skin has become rags

[...]

he has some nervous disorder

some psycho neurosis

[...]

his mother is a teacher

children laugh at her at school

they say she has given birth to an animal

[...he washes in the river at dusk

he uses some slippery leaves as soap[...]

small boys throw stones at the river

they shout

*xipengo, xipengo!*

[...]

mmbengwa

picks up papers in the streets

like a scavenger, he eats from dirty bins

The lack of support and comprehension from the rest of the community is a cancerous attitude, especially when it comes from alleged “role-models” like churchgoers (who self-profess men of compassion and goodwill) and policemen (who instead of “protecting and serving” their fellow citizens, they often brutalize them).

An asset of this poem is the multilingual interplay that the author stages in order to charge the story with sarcasm. The moniker Mmbengwa, i.e. “the hated one”, is taken from Tshivenda (Bila is Tsonga), and such an individual is hated not because of something he did or because he had wronged people, but because of his unfavourable social condition (poverty, physical deformity, etc.) and/or his erratic behaviour. This deeply-seated ostracising attitude towards the subjects who do not conform to the social “norms” of the community is reflected in the irony inherent in the children shouting “*xipengo, xipengo!*”, which could either be translated as “insanity, insanity” or “madness, madness” depending on the context<sup>vii</sup>.

Through Mmbengwa’s grand epic of marginalisation Bila points a straight finger against brothers and sisters who pretend not to see the pain and sorrow in the eyes of those who are considered ‘non-respectable’ members of the urban milieu. It is their selfish and hypocritical conduct which eventually leads the target (victim) of their widespread indifference and intolerance into isolation, alienation and self-annihilation:

he digs a grave alone every time the police come to arrest him  
he swears, mouth full of shit  
he tells them to go to hell  
he threatens he will cut his dick  
with a *minora* razor blade  
squeeze his balls  
with pliers  
he says he will use a sisal rope  
to hang on a tree in the bush  
eternally to heaven  
he tells them he will jump off the tall wall  
& break his spine  
or rip his stomach open

wit a sharp okapi knife  
or throw himself into a deep pool  
[...]  
if they don't leave him alone  
[...]  
mmbengwa  
sings like a bird  
sweet melody  
listen to his sweet baritone voice  
it surpasses that of rebecca malope  
the gospel woman  
with a golden voice  
*hallelujah hosanna* he sings  
he goes to church every year end  
[...]  
he reads the bible non-stop  
he tells the minister  
*I am sick*  
*Please help me*  
He quivers  
& weeps bitterly  
people of god just keep on walking past  
mmbengwa  
is found frozen  
floating in a pool  
his private parts missing  
[...]  
few people attend the funeral  
he is buried in a cheap coffin  
no after tears

Bila's clever use of linguistic shades and his sharp sensitivity, coupled with his empathy towards the dramas of the society's underdogs and outcasts, are here distilled in a lyrical portrayal of some of the most disturbing contradictions of life in poor communities. More than a sterile denounce of black-on-black hatred, "Mmbengwa" is an invitation to look deep inside one's conscience in search of the solutions to overcome such unfathomably degrading situations. The subtle message of this poem is that blaming politicians for all the wrongdoings is too a simplistic and superficial approach to the problems one has to face in the daily struggle for survival. Furthermore, although criticising the current dispensation is necessary and long overdue, it might offer the chance to shrug off one's shoulders the responsibility for what happens at grassroots level. The bottom-up cultural change indispensable for the uplifting of the communities, as advocated by Bila, can thus happen only through a carefully meditated reconsideration of the daily dynamics at play within one's environment, and through the verses of "Mmbengwa" the poet provides a unique opportunity to reflect upon such thought-provoking issues. Indeed, the whole collection *Handsome Jita* is dotted with poems which are tiny but intense, bitter reflections upon the lives of the scores of 'marginal' characters who populate the everyday stories of the oppressed communities. The peculiar attention the poet puts on the vicissitudes of these subjects is clearly discernible in several poems. In "The Disabled Man" Bila accounts of a former philander, "a rebel without a clue", an irresponsible man who in his early days used to practice unsafe sex and driving around defying all basic safety rules and common sense. As a result he was jeopardising his own health while at the same time often leaving his occasional partners pregnant:

He used to sprint around in that sports car  
Playing *kwaito*, drinking and kissing  
He used to sleep with three women every day  
He deflowered countless virgins [...]  
He slept with over three thousand women so far  
(He was a straight man)  
he has children all over the country  
I don't know his HIV status  
He has suffered STD's many times



Such a man symbolises the “classic”, “successful” philander in societies where patriarchal subcultures dominate, and is a reflection of the frustrated *forma mentis* of many young males living in South Africa’s poorest communities.

Alongside his passion for women, this archetype of a post-modern, urban, patriarchal “role model” had a passion for alcohol, which eventually determined his predictable fate:

He hit a donkey on the road one night

He liked brandy so much

Now, “condemned in his wheel chair” after the car accident that turned his life upside down, he is doomed to a life of isolation, frustration and dependency.

These and other similar themes are touched in poems such as “A visit to Oom Brown”, “Horror of Phalaborwa”, “Apartheid Commando in the Park”, “The Graduate”, “Pregrado Flats, Polokwane”, “Car Watcher”, “Maria”, “Dahl Street, Pietersburg”, “Hot Plate” and “Xuvuri”. More specific accusations for the present deplorable living conditions in the poor communities are advanced in poems such as “What causes all this?”.

The uncertain future of the children – which, in turn, symbolises that of the whole black community – is another major preoccupation in Bila’s socially conscious poetry. Not accidentally the opening poem of his collection, “The Child was Born in Winter”, speaks about the murder of a newborn girl by the hands of her mother: a heinous crime set in a squalid context where life goes on after the killing, as if nothing had happened. This poem is a metaphor to describe the present life (and death) of millions of Africans, whose demands for decent services are simply ignored by the institutions: people betrayed and let down by former liberators, now turned into oppressors:

Birds mourned the death of a child

Her mother, so stone hearted

Wrapped yena in a plastic

And squeezed, squeezed

Just like this

[...]

A dog barked

it carried a wrapped plastic bag  
in the mouth  
how? (Bila 2007:1)

This sensitive topic is further articulated in “Janette, my Sister” – a heartbreaking, nostalgic homage to his little sister “who died on her mother’s back” – and expanded and rendered dramatically explicit in the much-quoted poem “Mr President Let the Babies Die”, which is a direct invective against the cynicism of former President Thabo Mbeki and, by extension, of all the technocrats who are too busy attending “important meetings in Washington DC”, and constantly turn a blind eye and a deaf ear on poor people’s legitimate pleads for justice.

In general, the poems included in *Handsome Jita* can be grouped into two main thematic sub-groups: the first one is the one described above, in which Bila addresses the unsolved contradictions of marginal(ised) people’s lives. The second includes poems in which the author deplores the grossness of the political leaders of neo-colonial South Africa, while at the same time he pays a tribute to those who are engaged in the struggles for the uplifting of oppressed communities in the global and local arenas. Hence Bila’s poetry is accusatory to politicians as much as it is laudatory of fellow poets/activists who deserve a special place in today’s struggle for liberation. Poems dedicated to un-televised heroes and heroines stand side-by-side with poems which directly accuse the corruption of the current political leaders, as if the former were the nemesis of the latter, the respective symbol of what is to be praised and condemned in the post-apartheid cultural and political arena. The deception incarnated in politicians like Thabo Mbeki (“Mr President Let the Babies Die”) and Robert Mugabe (“Dear Gabriel”) is counterbalanced by Bila’s sincere admiration and brotherly love for poets like Dennis Brutus (“Dennis on the March”) and Lesego Ramplokeng (“For Lesego Ramplokeng”). But the most exhaustive list of inspiring people readers should be look up to, in order to find example of genuine role models for the community, is provided in conclusive part of the poem “This World is For Sale”. The musical ending of this piece is a crescendo composed to be delivered in energetic performances, and it is structured upon the rhythmical repetition of the verse after which the poem is titled. In it Bila applauds national and international grassroots activists such as, amongst others, “trevor ngwane... jonah gokova... fatima meer, dennis brutus... noam chomsky... vandana shiva... valden bello... patrick bond... andile mngxitama... aminata traore” who “do not accept crumbs/nor sell our revolution” (Bila, 2007:97). As this poem powerfully shows, Bila’s

passionate approach to art is manifested in a vigorous poetic language, openly inspired by the ancient storytelling and performing styles of his African ancestors, in which elements like mythology and metaphors are pivotal parts of poetic landscapes. Ancestral languages are metaphorical, and myth is a metaphorical way of thinking and talking (Barthes, 2000). Bila's evocative language relies on the power of the imagination, rather than the power of rationality. Nonetheless, his way of approaching language (and thus culture and life) has its own "poetic rationale", and provides a means to render South Africa's chaotic world intelligible. In fact, the main role of corporate mass media in today's globalised world is to fabricate false myths and portray them in such a way that uncritical masses are forced to believe that they are actually true. The moral duty to unmask the dream of a free South Africa sold by mainstream media is one of the propelling forces that fuels Bila's poetic, as well as his social and political consciousness.

But his crude analysis of the innumerable problems which still affect African communities goes beyond the regionality of the current struggles for liberation, embracing a global dimension. Viewed in relation to ancient myths and legends, Bila's poetry is not something added on top of the daily 'ordinary' thinking and writing (Ndebele, 2006). It is certainly not entertainment or amusement, but a powerful tool to awake people's minds, and directs their attention on issues of vital importance. By approaching Bila's poetry one senses how his literary work is an act of resistance against the shabbiness of the present times, against the unabridged gulf between what embedded media profess and what real life has to offer. To him resistance implies something much more profound than the mere human act of confronting everyday existential problems. The painful memory of slavery, the humiliation of colonisation and apartheid, the disarming power of neocolonialism, the whole sense of total impotence are the historical realities that inspire, or perhaps torture the imagination of the most engaged post-apartheid poets. Bila verbalises very painful experiences by telling stories based on first-hand accounts of marginal people's lives, on their anger, frustration and desire for what should be, i.e. for the transformation of the outside landscape so that the inner one could flourish.

Such preoccupations stand at the core of Ndebele's *Rediscovery of the ordinary* (Ndebele, 2006) in which, at the dawn of the present age of the new South Africa, Ndebele invited writers to carry out an 'imaginative leap' in order to escape the prison walls of hatred and resentment. For Ndebele, the creative horizons of most South African literature have been narrowed by the all-pervasive spectre of the "excess of apartheid". The fresh landscapes of expressivity granted by

the new political order, are offering the writers (for the very first time in South Africa's modern history) the opportunity to go 'beyond protest', and thus reinvent the creative substratum from which literatures get their nourishment. The languages of these 'post-protest' literatures should thus feel free to explore a whole new range of issues, without necessarily recurring to narratives based on explicit political confrontation. This does not mean that writers should give up denouncing the evils of the present dispensation. As many political and social analysts (Bond, 2000; 2004; Desai, 2003; Saul, 2005; Ballard, Habib & Valodia, 2006, Zegeye & Maxted, 2003) have exposed the end of the apartheid regime did not coincide with the end of exploitation, oppression and subjugation of the black masses.

Despite the presence of a democratic façade, the structural problems of black communities remain unsolved and, in many ways, are becoming everyday more and more urgent and dramatic. It is pertinent to note that the persistence of sheer inequalities in the post-apartheid regime profoundly influences the way young poets conceive and approach their writing. However, as Furniss and Gunner (1995) suitably maintain, reflecting creatively upon such injustice empowers writers, thus turning them into effective agents of change: "social marginality does not make the artist powerless; it is often precisely such a position that enables the speaker/artist to attack and occasionally to devastate" (Furniss & Gunner, 1995:xii).

Bila's poetry encapsulates this notion of emancipating power to be exercised within the space of 'marginality': as an authentic 'marginal' artist (in bell hooks's sense), he "contests dominant cultural forces, furnishing thereby a vigorous alternative voice" (Furniss & Gunner, 1995:xii).

## **Conclusion**

This article discusses the spoken-word poetry of Vonani Bila. It argues that Bila's post-1994 "resistance poetry" deals in detail with some of the most urgent issues concerning the role of young writers in the revitalisation of black cultural and political dissent in South Africa. Bila is a vigorous *art-ctivist*, i.e. a poet who does not limit the scope of his work to writing, but is deeply and personally involved in a vast range of strictly related activities such as publishing, editing, project managing as well as grassroots political organisation. There are many ways of approaching poetry, of enjoying, assimilating and performing it, and poetry carries out countless functions: it corresponds to and interprets human experience in all its virtually infinite variety, and it always encapsulates it in different ways. Critically investigating the various narrative styles

crafted by young South African spoken-word artists, and exploring their creative experiences can help readers to interact with poetry in unexpected ways and to enjoy it better, by removing rooted prejudices and misunderstandings. By engaging critically with ‘overtly political’ post-apartheid poetic texts, this article aims at presenting the political and cultural territories mapped by the county’s youngest poets, but also at offering insightful views on the dilemmas of present times.

## Notes

1. As Chapman points out, the poetry that sprang out of the locations in the 1970s was people-centred. Chapman recalls poignant “labels” such as “township poetry”, “participatory poetry” and “People’s poetry”, amongst other definitions for the poetry movement which gained momentum in the aftermaths of the Sharpeville massacre. Although, “these labels all have a certain fitness” (Chapman 1982: 11), he agreeably asserts that “Soweto poetry [...] does seem the most satisfactory of them for a distinct genre which emerged after the almost total proscription in the sixties of a previous generation of black South African literature”. As Chapman underlines: “[T]his earlier writing included the racy Sophiatown prose of the fifties, as well as the poetry of Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile and Dennis Brutus. Soweto poetry, in the first work of Casey Motsitsi, Njabulo Ndebele, Mtshali Serote and Gwala concentrated on the immediacy of day-to-day township life, especially in Soweto itself.” (Chapman 1982: 11).
2. Interestingly, all these small, independent publishing houses are run by poets: Geko by Phehello Mofokeng, Timbila Poetry Project by Vonani Bila, Modjaji Books by Colleen Higgs, Dye Hard Press by Gary Cummiskey, Deep South by Robert Berold.
3. In Johannesburg, Timbila Poetry Project is run by poet Maserame June Madingwane, who organises poetry sessions, amongst other activities. During these meetings audiences get engaged in discussions on poetry, politics and literature. In addition, the events always schedule a guest poet (usually, but not necessarily, a published poet) who is invited to perform his/her own works together with emerging poets during the ‘open mic’ session. These sessions have been graced by the presence of outstanding spoken word poets such as the enchanting Caribbean UK-based Dorothea Smartt, and South African Myesha Jenkins, Natalia Molebatsi, Thatelo Morapedi, Bandile Gumbi, and Flo Mokale.

4. This is the reason why Bila and other poets like Dennis Brutus have taken part in the political actions of the so called *new social movements*, the network of grassroots organisations which, as Desai (2003) has shown, represent a strenuous political opposition to the government.
5. The oral poetry tradition of Sardinia is one of the oldest of Europe. For further reading, see Zedda (2009) and Pagliai (2009).
6. On 30 January 2010, Bila was one of the featured poets at the Brutus's memorial poetry service "In memory of Dennis Brutus". In that meeting held at the Bassline in Newtown, Johannesburg, hosted by political activist Trevor Ngwane and graced by the presence of Prof. Patrick Bond and poets such as Lefifi Tladi, Lesego Rampolokeng, Common Man and Natalia Molebatsi, Bila performed a breathless rendition of "Dennis on the March" in what was probably the highest emotional moment of the whole event.
7. I am grateful to Tshifhiwa Given Mukwevho for the Tshivenda to English translations.

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