

Serote's Poems of Healing, Leadership, and Transformation: "There *Will* be a Better Time Made by Us"

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Summary

Liberating South Africa from more than three centuries of colonial oppression required enormous vision and self-empowerment, to advance a struggle that was not only counter-hegemonic but also transformative. Wally Serote, one of the most influential and enduring poet-activists, drew on African music, spirituality, oral literature and history of the struggle to develop and articulate his calling as a liberator and healer. Written in exile, his prescient poems invoke faith in African popular resources to illustrate and teach the importance of challenging oppression. Beyond offering incisive representations of African subject positions, the poems invoke the creative energies needed to generate the psychological, social and cultural healing required for transformation. Against the background of the subjugation and decimation of African cultures and resources and the forced exile of thousands of citizens, Serote's attentiveness to the development of engaged and liberated African voices in the medium of English helped alert fellow activists and poet-activists to the value of integrating the roles of historian, healer, social conscience and critic (as in various African oral traditions). In the light of such exile, Serote's objective of overcoming the limitations imposed by colonial and apartheid power was crucial. By focusing on thinking beyond the binaries of colonialism-apartheid, Serote was able to advance a culture of popular-democratic engagement, agency and mobilisation. The poems articulate an ethos more recently recognised as a combination of transformative learning and transformational leadership, and anticipate the leadership skills that would later be valued in Nelson Mandela. This study draws on the approaches of critical theory, critical social theory and critical pedagogy.

Opsomming

Om Suid-Afrika te bevry van meer as drie eeue van koloniale verdrukking het enorme visie en selfbemaagtiging geverg, om 'n stryd te bevorder wat nie net teen-hegemonies was nie, maar ook transformerend. Wally Serote, een van die mees invloedryke en bestendige digter-aktiviste, het van Afrika-musiek, spiritualiteit, mondelinge literatuur en geskiedenis van die struggle gebruik gemaak om sy roeping as 'n bevryder en 'n geneser te ontwikkel en te verwoord. Serote se voorwetende gedigte, wat in ballingskap geskryf is, roep geloof in Afrika- populêre hulpbronne op om die belangrikheid van uitdagende verdrukking te illustreer en te onderrig.

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Buiten dat dit deurdringende voorstellings van die posisies van Afrika-onderwerpe bied, roep die gedigte die kreatiewe energie op wat nodig is om die sielkundige, sosiale en kulturele genesing wat nodig is vir transformasie, te genereer. Teen die agtergrond van die onderwerping en uitdunning van Afrika-kulture en hulpbronne, en die geforseerde ballingskap van duisende burgers, het Serote se aandag aan die ontwikkeling van betrokke en bevryde Afrika-stemme in Engels as medium gehelp om mede-aktiviste en digter-aktiviste bewus te maak van die waarde daarvan om die rolle van historikus, geneesheer, sosiale gewete en kritikus (soos in verskeie Afrika-mondelinge tradisies) te integreer. In die lig van sodanige ballingskap was Serote se doelwit, naamlik om die beperkings wat koloniale en apartheid-mag daargestel het, te oorkom. Deur daarop te konsentreer om verder as die binêre van kolonialisme-apartheid te dink, kon Serote daarin slaag om 'n kultuur van populêr-demokratiese betrokkenheid, bemiddeling en mobilisering te bevorder. Die gedigte verwoord 'n etos wat meer onlangs erken is as 'n kombinasie van transformerende leer en transformasionele leierskap, en antisipeer die leierskapsvaardighede wat later op prys gestel sou word as kenmerkend van Nelson Mandela. Hierdie studie wend die benaderings van kritiese teorie, kritiese sosiale teorie en kritiese pedagogie aan.

Introduction

The struggle requires the exercise of democracy, criticism and self-criticism, growing participation by the people in running their own lives, literacy, the creation of schools and health services, leadership training for persons with rural and urban labouring backgrounds, and many other developments which impel people to set forth upon the road of cultural progress.
(Cabral 1979: 211)

Challenging colonialism and settler colonialism (ie apartheid) in South Africa has required skill, resilience and courageous leadership, to deal with the structural distortions and the material and psychological devastation that had been entrenched over more than three centuries. The violent, comprehensive and sustained colonial seizure of African land and natural and human resources had been challenged from the outset, and by the 1960s many thousands of activists had been either killed or jailed for fighting for basic rights, among them leaders like Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe. After the Soweto uprising of the 1970s, the crackdowns against Black Consciousness (BC) organisations included bannings, arrests, torture, and the killing of activists like Steve Biko by the apartheid "security" police.

The poet Mongane Wally Serote had been imprisoned without trial, tortured and held in solitary confinement while he was a member of BC in 1969. The repression led to thousands of activists going into exile. Serote wrote the poem "Behold Mama, Flowers" while on a Fullbright scholarship in the United States in 1975, and it was published in the eponymous collection in 1978. Serote's understanding of the popular and democratic

character of the anti-colonial struggle for liberation suggests the influence of a range of anti-colonial activists, among them the Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau resistance leader Amilcar Cabral. Addressing UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in 1972 on the critical role of culture in popular struggles for liberation, Cabral pointed out that during resistance a

reciprocal relationship between culture and the struggle develops. Culture, as a foundation and a source of inspiration, begins to be influenced by the struggle; and this influence is reflected more or less clearly, in the changing behaviour of social categories and individuals as well.

(1979: 211)

Illustrating Cabral's insights, the engaged art of Wally Serote offers substantive evidence that cultural activity in the South African struggle did more than reflect or accompany the liberation process. Through his involvement in BC, and then in the exiled African National Congress, Serote demonstrates the understanding that people who believed in freedom had to engage in the liberation struggle and to offer more than critique. Given that discourse is one of the major social practices in the reproduction of racial oppression (e.g. Van Dijk 1993), Serote explored the capacity of poetry to advance and create a culture of freedom. Through various cultural and artistic experiments Serote helped expand the liberatory capacities of the genres of poetry and prose in English. His poems helped audiences envision and develop the agency to invoke a liberated South Africa. Even his earliest publications (e.g. 1972) indicate that Serote's objective was more than counter-hegemonic, in their attempts to empower people to achieve freedom, personally, socially, and politically.

Undaunted by the repression of the state and by the objections of conflicted "liberal" (more accurately conservative-liberal) intellectuals to "political" poetry (e.g. see critiques by Sole 1978; Narismulu 1998), Serote persisted in a range of political, artistic and linguistic experiments. He drew on literary art, one of the few resources activists could use, to develop more effective and democratic strategies and dispositions for tackling the dangerous challenge of asserting basic rights, and to express the need for developing more sovereign subjects and structures. Along with a range of resistance poets, dramatists, novelists and short story artists, Serote's poems attempted to encourage and empower ordinary people to intervene in various oppressive discourses of power, to advance the delicate and complex social and political processes of transformation. Together with the values of freedom and justice, democracy was a powerful organising strategy in the resistance to settler-colonial oppression in South Africa, and it offered a surprisingly sustained challenge to the security of the apartheid regime, rather than the Communism or Marxism that the National Party government chose to vilify.

Artists like Serote reached beyond the colonial-apartheid limitations and propaganda to draw on indigenous African ontologies, values, interpersonal relations, and the resources of oral histories, literatures, music, spirituality and healing. This included taking responsibility for interpersonal, communal and societal wellbeing (as articulated in the African value of *ubuntu*, ie humaneness). Given the pedagogical significance of much of oral literature, such engagements often addressed the social challenges of learning and development under and despite apartheid. The attentiveness to healing that characterises Serote's poetry is an integral part of this rubric, and contributes to the culture of transformation, particularly through the commitment to generating popular-democratic agency and leadership (as will be argued). At the same time participation in the struggle helped rescue South African culture from various colonial/ imperial distortions and dependencies, and from being fragmented, divided and marginalized along the apartheid fault lines, by giving direction and substance to that which had been incipient and sometimes inchoate. In turn the popular-democratic literature of the 1970s and 1980s helped establish an anticolonial culture which overcame the accretions of history to imaginatively will political and cultural independence into being.

“Behold Mama, Flowers”

In a deeply polarised society, where the apartheid state and ruling classes were unable to solve the multiple crises they had created and benefitted from, Serote crafted his poems to overcome the distance and challenges of exile and to explore the possibilities of imaginative liberation. Serote's substantive contributions to cultural, literary, discursive and political transformation were made through the creation of a range of engaged and self-reflexive poems that address profound personal, social and political needs for freedom. These poems were published in three collections: *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978), *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982a) and some poems appeared at the end of *Selected Poems* (1982b). The poems engage in what subsequently came to be understood and theorised as Transformative Learning (Mezirow 1991, 1997). At the same time the poems exemplify the vision, depth of commitment and innovation of what has elsewhere been conceptualised as Transformational Leadership (by Downton 1973; and Burns 1978, as cited by Antonakis et al 2009) more than a decade before such attributes would be valued in the actions and disposition of liberation leaders like Nelson Mandela.

Serote's long poem “Behold Mama, Flowers” (11-61) begins with the dedication: “For Bantu Steve Biko, though it is so late!” Biko and other BC activists had raised generative questions and created political and community structures to tackle oppression and advance Black independence, self-awareness, and self-empowerment (Biko 1978). Threatened by this, the

“security” police of the apartheid state had hounded and detained Biko without trial, and then tortured and killed him in September 1977. The poem invokes a range of African leaders suppressed or destroyed by colonial oppression across the continent and elsewhere to expose and challenge systemic violations, and to enable readers/audiences begin to heal through a dialogical process of remembering, mourning, reflecting, and reframing, which is realised through a ritualised dramatic performance. Advancing a democratic culture by speaking openly is risky and difficult, and exacerbated by the subaltern predicaments that require the use of a hegemonic colonial language whose power has been built on the devastation of many people and their languages:

now i speak in many, many broken tongues
while i seek Africa

(p. 49)

The first third of the poem is built upon an incremental series of questions that invoke generative responses (Freire and Faundez 1989) to enable critical social engagement and learning even when addressing complex and intractable problems. The questions help audiences name and address challenges that have often been unspeakable, and help advance creative thinking and problem solving through allowing for better reasoning, deeper insights, and even catharsis.

The first question in the poem is “who do I know” (11), which occurs in the first few lines and is not repeated. However, the rest of the lines resonate this emblematic question that is both directed at other people and deeply self-reflexive (as the stress shifts from the first to the third words). Such inferences are strengthened by the word “but” that precedes the question, which suggests that the focus is on the psychological and existential implications of who people believe they are after the nightmare of colonialism. The first question is followed a few lines later by “what do we want” (11). The pronoun signals that the speaker is acting in community and the utterance indicates that the speaker is alert to the complex challenges in the construction of any community (after the colonial-apartheid policy of divide and rule) and the self, as are prefigured in the first question. By disrupting the structural and systemic inequalities of colonialism and capitalism, the second question seeks to spur people to defend their rights and interests by being attentive to their values and goals, which include taking responsibility for transforming themselves.

This is followed by the refrain “how can I forget” (from p. 12 onwards) which is repeated many times over many pages. Such a question is reflexive and challenges the suppression of inconvenient facts, while advancing the importance of empathetic understanding and responsibility for awareness of history, it hints that the future depends on the leadership capacity of the

oppressed. The interrogative formulation “how can” occurs over twenty times and represents an assertive, public and responsible enquiry in a society (and world) that had been colonised with impunity. Later the question expands from the singular form to “how can we forget” (23) to recognise leaders killed in liberation struggles. In addition to addressing the problems of racial oppression, the questions challenge the apartheid culture and contradict the horrendous Bantu Education Act (1953) to educate audiences to reflect upon their seemingly binaried subject positions and develop agency. The use of questions is a particularly productive strategy to challenge the repressive apartheid system, so as to get on with dealing with the trauma that had been inflicted and reframe experiences, to begin to take control of communication, to insist on answers, to develop solutions in community, and to advance popular-democratic leadership. Like Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Luther King, Biko had demonstrated that incisive questions can help generate information about what is needed and what is to be done, so enabling mobilisation and freedom of thought, expression, and action to emerge.

Another question that is raised many times is the exploratory “what will happen” (p. 14 onwards), which becomes the observant “what will happen now” that is repeated more than a dozen times. Sometimes anticipating future outcomes in “what will happen then”, the question segues into “what are we going to do with what we know” (26). All the options are important for planning both in the rational and transformational leadership modalities. The probing sets of questions function to organise complex themes (like the core clichés in oral literature) in ways that enable the advance to freedom and democratic sovereignty. There is a larger shift in the formulation of another reflexive and challenging question “how can we talk/ if we don’t see each other” (15). In a society plagued by elite and institutionalised blindness to the basic rights of the majority, this question anticipates and predicates the organisational strategies that fostered the shift from denialism to begin to focus on meeting the needs for substantive redress. This inference is strengthened a page later by the question “how can i forgive” (16), which is repeated four more times, and reinforced linguistically the last two times by the paradoxical conjunction in “but how can i forgive”, which deftly renders (and straddles) the difficult contradictions that have had to be bridged. This particular question was to prove critical during the following decade, the 1980s. Millions of South Africans from all groups grew beyond the travesties of racial oppression (underpinned by the racial / national / ethnic fictions into which they had been driven by the apartheid state) to develop more empowered and liberated (ie sovereign) subject positions through organizations like the United Democratic Front and COSATU (the Congress of South African Trade Unions). The question was engaged again (in different ways) by Mandela and Desmond Tutu a decade later, and helped generate substantive shifts in the course of South African history in the

1990s. That some of the beneficiaries of apartheid have continued to prove unequal to such magnanimity only heightens the value of each of the choices made by the majority of South Africans at every stage, and the transformative options that have flowed from their resolve. Through the questions Serote skilfully redefines the role of the oppressed as the agents of liberation. This is paralleled by the generative choices made by millions of people at most stages of the popular-democratic struggle for liberation.

Continuing with the challenge of generative critical thinking, the meta-question “what do we want” appears again later (26) and is repeated about a dozen times. In the context of centuries of colonial/apartheid repression, the question (with the stress on “want” and, more generatively, on “we”) has been an important driver of the popular-democratic ethos of transformation. The repetitions are interspersed with another powerful question: “what are we going to do with what we know” (26) which insists that knowledge and agency exist on a continuum. This question is repeated in the increasingly generative and insistent “what are we going to do now” (28) and “africa, answer me/ what are we going to do now” (29-30). An important answer to the meta-question is offered in the conclusion (amidst the usual ego-centred digressions that dot a path):

i can say, behold the flowers
for their scent has taken other shapes
i can say ...

(p. 60)

i can say, ah
behold the flowers ...
i will say again
behold the flowers, they begin to bloom!

(p. 61)

Accompanying the sets of questions are many refrains that act like responsive choruses, organising and advancing the key contentions of the long poem. These include the tropes “on the road” (to freedom), “my brother” (signifying care, solidarity and equality, in a gendered formulation characteristic even of academia of the 1970s), and the powerful “I can say” chant, with repetitions that rise to a crescendo (on p. 17). The critical questions generate the discursive creativity of the declamatory “I can say” refrain that shifts into the assertive “I will say again”, before the injunction of the final line that underscores the transformative significance of generative vision.

In these ways the poem addresses and enacts the dialogical processes by which people may overcome oppression to actively reconstruct meaning in their lives. By reflexively engaging values, viewpoints and alternatives, the poem not only describes but teaches its audiences how to understand and act

upon difficult challenges. Such a process is very similar to what has more recently been identified as Transformative Learning, which enables people to become more autonomous by learning to develop and negotiate their own values and meanings (Mezirow 1997). The cumulative effect of the questions and responses serves to challenge entrenched viewpoints and perspectives, and gives rise to the meta-questions that serve fundamental transformatory processes (such as, What is the point of asking this question, Why is this question being raised, What else needs to be questioned, or What difference would that make).

Recognising the Significance of Audiences

South African writers have begun to forge a genuine literature of the people: a literature in which the spectator and the reader have acquired an importance that is perhaps unprecedented in the history of literature: a literature which reflects back to its readers their struggle for emancipation, and at the same time reinvigorates them for that very struggle: a literature which has abandoned the universities and the comfortable living rooms of the intellectuals in favour of the streets.

(Watts 1989: 37)

South African resistance writers in English went beyond colonial literary prescriptions to reach and address the interests of their primary intended audiences, oppressed African people. Writers like Serote sought effective ways of constructing and relating to their intended audiences. Owing to the challenges of educational underdevelopment, language access, financial costs and the absence of libraries or other public resources for the majority of people, communities of readers had to be willed, strategised and imagined into being. Despite or perhaps because of their manifest skills, many resistance writers opted to forego the dubious privilege of literary distance in a divided society, and began to use voices recognisable as their own, as they tried to develop a sense of community despite the entrenched divisions of apartheid. This was an important goal of the liberation struggle, which required the development of the cultural and political agency of the oppressed. Addressing the focus of his work Serote said "I have always wanted to be guided in my writing by the aspirations of my people (Chapman 1982: 113). In response to a question about his intended audience in his previous poem *No Baby Must Weep* (1975) Serote declared: "It's directed at Africans in particular ... it's Africans who hold the tools of liberation in South Africa" (114). This also applies to Serote's subsequent publications, where his attentiveness to his audience underpins his affirmation of the cultural and political significance of ordinary people.

In a country built on dividing, marginalising and excluding the indigenous majority, and decimating various liberation movements, writers like Serote helped sustain and lead the struggles for freedom and democracy by invoking,

addressing, and implicitly uniting the oppressed people as the intended audiences of their literature. Given the pressure of competing claims by the censors, publishers and conservative-liberal critics, resistance writers developed great clarity about their mission as they directed their artistic work at empowering and liberating their intended readers. This in turn influenced the nature of their cultural production. With the imprisonment, exile or murder of many resistance leaders, Serote looked to popular and distributed leadership as a vital and sustainable strategic resource.

The first person plural pronoun “we” predominates in most of the poems in the *Behold Mama, Flowers* collection: “Time has Run Out” (1982a: 1-14; 1982b: 125-134) and “Notes” (1982a: 20-22) begin with “i” and “I” respectively, then shift to the collective (“we”) mode. Subsequent poems that also use “we” include “The Long Road” (1982a: 27-30). This is also the case with the poems included at the end of the *Selected Poems*: “No More Strangers” (1982b: 135-137), “The Breezing Dawn of the New Day” (1982b: 138-141) and “Excerpts from There will be a better time” (1982b: 142-144). *A Tough Tale* (1987) intersperses both the singular and plural forms of the pronoun. These developments in Serote’s work appear linked to his commitment to support embattled audiences, as “Modes of Introits from Familiar Sights” (1978) suggests:

our tongues having survived throttling assaults we will keep a simple speech.
(p. 85)

In the conclusion to “When Lights Go Out” (1978: 69-70) Serote offers a simple and effective demonstration of the scale of responsibility that rests upon the audiences (years before the mass mobilisation of the mid-late 1980s). The challenge in the concluding lines suggests that what the reader derives from such a (necessarily) cryptic statement is underpinned by how much trust is built by the speaker, and what the audience is willing to contribute, to achieve liberation:

only if we know how, can we harness time – can you hear the footsteps.
(pp. 69-70)

In “There will be a Better Time” (1982b: 142-144) Serote focuses on inspiring transformation, for instance, by strategically eliding “we” and “will”:

if the we is the most of us
and the most of us is the will
the will to say no
when the most of us will create a better time
there will be a better time.

(p. 142)

The poem advances to affirm the value of the collective will of many millions of South Africans:

yes there will be a better time because we say so there will be a better time
because like our warriors we make a better time and many of us know that we
can and must ... ah there *will* be a better time made by us.

(pp. 143-144)

It is in the content of the pronoun “we” that the popular-democratic impetus is seen most clearly in its difference from the individualistic poetic models of western high culture. Recognising the necessity for oppressed people to see themselves as a cohesive group, the poet focuses on using the few available spaces and media to enable the process. Given the needs and the toll of the struggle, Serote shows strategic leadership by emphasising the generative aspects of cultural productivity.

The Transformative Significance of Metaphor in “Behold Mama, Flowers”

Through the *Behold Mama, Flowers* collection Serote offers many skilful demonstrations of the capacity of literary art to engage productively with horrifying aspects of colonialism-apartheid. Apparently in response to another resistance poet, James Matthews, who challenged the efficacy of colonially sanctioned literature in the slaughterhouse (“should i play the poet changing words into flowers” 1990: 63), Serote draws on the image of flowers to create a complex metaphor. The metaphor has to challenge both colonial oppression as well as the hackneyed conventions of cultural imposition, while advancing the culture of liberation. Serote effects this by reconfiguring the symbolism of flowers, as may be inferred from his staged “explanation” of the title in the Foreword:

Listen, Skunder Boghossian says, once, a man chopped a body many, many times – he chopped this body into many, many small pieces and threw them into the flowing river. When the pieces, floating and flowing, began to dance with the rhythm of the river, a child, seeing this, said, “Mama, look at the flowers!” So says Skunder, my painter brother. I could if I like, call him my fisherman brother; ah, what is it that matters in this hour? I even forget whether he read or heard this story: Behold Mama, Flowers!

(1978: 8)

The words of the child suggest the innocence, joy and freedom that cannot be quenched, and celebrate the possibility of fresh and creative responses to experience, despite all the horror that has been endured. Serote clearly counted on the tale lulling the censors, and this collection was not banned, although *The Night Keep Winking* (1982a) was banned.

The child's vision does not mitigate the death squad killings sanctioned by the apartheid governments: the dismembered body in Boghossian's tale suggests activists who were secretly killed and dumped. The image in the Foreword was confirmed by testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in 1997, almost two decades after *Behold Mama, Flowers* was published. The TRC heard that three members of the Port Elizabeth Civic Organisation and other activists were abducted and killed in 1985 by six Eastern Cape "security" branch officers. They had tortured, killed, burned and dismembered the PEBCO 3 before dumping them in the Fish River (SABC TV 22.2.97; TRC Vol. 3 1998: 117). It is significant that Serote's collection was published in 1978, eight years before *these* killings actually occurred, and nineteen years before the police made their admissions (Narismulu 2001: 25).

Long before the TRC, the poem seeks to enable oppressed people to begin to deal with traumatic forms of oppression (the historical, structural, interpersonal and intergenerational silences surrounding trauma are addressed by Radithalo, 2013). Through the image of the flowers Serote takes on some of the worst depredations of apartheid and reframes them to show how historical aberrations may be creatively re-presented to transform the very people they were meant to undermine. With the child as focaliser, the metaphor reframes the hacked bodies discarded in a river as flowers. At the same time the metaphor of flowers also mocks the state that sought to obliterate dissent through extreme violence.

The metaphor also mocks the conservative-liberal beneficiaries of the apartheid state who prescribed from their privileged lives that Black poets should not be political but write about unthreatening subjects like flowers (e.g. see Narismulu 1998). However, the poet challenges such representations of reality. Through strategic use of the clichéd metaphor of flowers, by a child too young to have been socialised into such tastes, the poet dismisses the behaviour of the ruling groups to challenge his intended audiences' grasp of reality, while attempting to create new meanings and interpretive options, that include knowledge of the clandestine killings, and an enabling myth.

While it is a stronger rhetorical trope than an analogy or simile, Serote's metaphor issues from a protracted struggle. The vehicle of the metaphor ("flowers") does not displace the subject/tenor that it conditions, ie the slaughtered activists. Clearly Serote is not just using a metaphor, he is changing the poetic trope so that it advances (rather than undermines) transformation in an unjust society. The power of Serote's metaphor inheres in how it renovates the daunting subject of decimated activists by creatively reframing the inevitable losses in struggle, so that the clandestine police death squads, government propaganda or elite artistic prescriptions did not deter people. By showing audiences how to acknowledge and navigate past colonial-apartheid oppression the metaphor suggests that

oppressive forces have little chance against determined healers/ educators/ leaders: lives destroyed by the state are shown to be not entirely lost but reconceptualised to advance liberation (as suggested by images of flowers and roads/ paths/ journeys that pervade the poem).

The metaphor illustrates the strategic significance of art, and of the everyday activity of interpretation. By taking what was done and decreed by a confluence of elite forces, and reconceptualising them to address the needs of people under protracted siege, the poet tackles concealed forms of trauma and oppression. In addition to preparing people for more activists' deaths (eg through prophecy, as indicated above), the poem alludes to the existence of death squads. That F.W. de Klerk (the last apartheid leader) has continued to deny knowledge of such operations, despite Eugene de Kock's testimony to the contrary (1998), underscores the significance of Serote's skilled combination of the roles of teacher, oral poet, prophet, healer, social conscience, and historian.

Conclusion

Through the use of an extended metaphor Serote offers a guide to how generative questions may be not only raised against oppression but also answered, to overcome oppression. The questions and the exemplary metaphor in this collection from 1978 help guide communities at home, in exile, and even those with integrity among the ruling classes, to find ways to begin to redress the heinous crimes against humanity. By actively working to shift the impact of such forms of oppression, the metaphor tries to change the subjection and the subject positions of the oppressed and of the beneficiaries of apartheid, to enable people to reconceptualise their roles. In these ways the poet teaches South Africans how to redefine the meaning and value of our history, and how each person needs to develop the agency equal to each of our challenges, beginning with the representation of our experiences in all our discourses.

The approaches of Critical Social Theory and Critical Pedagogy (Transformative learning and Transformational leadership) support the inference that in the poems written between the mid-1970s and early 1980s Wally Serote attempted from exile to empower and lead fellow South Africans to tackle some of the most critical challenges in generating liberation out of the struggles against apartheid, capitalism and neo-imperialism. At a time when little was understood about the impact of structural or repressive violence and trauma, the poet created innovative ways of addressing suffering that did not require the surrendering of critical dialogue or justice. The poems articulate the cognitive maturity and metacognitive skills that gave rise to the transformative thinking that eventually prevailed over apartheid, but which still has to be recognised and understood so that we may all grow.

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