



## The need for a feminism: Black township writing

Margaret Lenta

To cite this article: Margaret Lenta (1988) The need for a feminism: Black township writing, Journal of Literary Studies, 4:1, 49-63, DOI: [10.1080/02564718808529851](https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718808529851)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718808529851>



Published online: 06 Jul 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 13



View related articles [↗](#)

# The need for a feminism: black township writing

Margaret Lenta

## Summary

The essay looks at four books by contemporary black writers, *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Blame Me on History* by Bloke Modisane (both autobiographies) *Fools and Other Stories* by Njabulo Ndebele and *To Every Birth Its Blood* by Mongane Serote. It compares the sense of the rôles and experiences of South African Black women which these writers offer with that of Sol Plaatje in his historical romance, *Mhudi*, first published in 1930 and written about 1917. Plaatje seems to have believed that the dissolution of traditional and tribal bonds between members of age groups and the distancing of the young from their elders would strengthen the bond between man and wife and allow women to become joint decision makers with their husbands. The four contemporary writers are much more conservative and tend to portray women as passive victims of their men.

## Opsomming

Vier boeke deur eietydse swart skrywers word behandel: *Down Second Avenue* deur Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Blame Me on History* deur Bloke Modisane (albei outobiografieë), *Fools and Other Stories* deur Njabulo Ndebele en *To Every Birth Its Blood* deur Mongane Serote. Dit vergelyk die sin vir die rolle en ervaring van Suid-Afrikaanse swart vroue by hierdie skrywers met dié van Sol Plaatje in sy historiese roman, *Mhudi*, wat aanvanklik in 1930 gepubliseer is en ongeveer 1917 geskryf is. Plaatje het skynbaar geglo dat die ontbinding van tradisionele en stambande tussen lede van ouderdomsgroepe en die distansiering tussen die jeug en die ouer garde die band tussen man en vrou sou versterk en vrouens sou toelaat om gemeenskaplike besluitnemers saam met hulle mans te word. Die vier eietydse skrywers is veel konserwatiewer en neig om vrouens as passiewe slagoffers van hulle mans uit te beeld.

It has been suggested that feminism is an improper interest for South Africans, a middle class luxury which the people of a land so torn by racism cannot afford.<sup>1</sup> It is true, of course, that the idea of equal opportunities in education or employment for black women and men seems a bitter joke, given the miserable opportunities available to most black men. And that reassessment of the past which is concerned to reveal the contributions made by women to their societies may appear a low priority in a society controlled by those who propagate the myth that the only significant contributors, past and present, have been white males. But at this point we pause; South Africans are accustomed to hearing claims that so-and-so's grandfather built the port of Durban, so-and-so's great uncle established the gold mining industry on the Reef. We know that at best such claims mean that these white men were involved in the supervision of early projects in the industrialization of our land. We know too that there is in this country a strong sense that only white males should be credited with important achievements.

This understanding should alert us to the fact that we experience every day the success of one group in appropriating to itself the credit for and profits of

another's labours. We are well placed to understand how terrible is the plight of a section of community whose labour is undervalued and whose needs are ignored. The invisibility of the black worker behind the white manager resembles so closely the traditional position of woman in relation to man, and the economic and social injustices which follow in both these cases are so similar that South Africans appear advantageously placed for sympathising with feminism.

For the purposes of this article, I shall define feminism as the demand for social and economic justice for women, and I shall argue that it is a demand which for the sake of the whole community black women must feel entitled to make. I do not suggest that they see justice to themselves as something which white women should define, or even influence, but rather that they should feel free to consider their own needs. What I do wish to claim is that black writing of the present and the recent past has a strong tendency to ignore the sufferings of black women, or to regard them as inevitable.

The images of women, of marriage and of man-woman relationships in the writings of blacks in the post-World War II period have, I suggest, been "conservative" in a special sense: they have tended to retain the idea of the man as family head and decision-maker. Given the fact that the writing which I have chosen to examine shows men as frequently confused, defeated and incapable of rational decision making, it is probably truer to say that men are portrayed as determining, involuntarily, and often fatally the destiny of the family group. Nevertheless it is rare for a male writer fully to recognise the abilities and rights of women to make decisions and initiate action; even Mphahlele, perhaps because in his autobiographical writing he is committed to recording what was, cannot show a woman who is sure that she has a right to rebel against male exploitation. Yet the social changes of this century have left many black women at the centres of families, sole parents, though usually debarred from the legal rights of guardians. The wife of the migrant worker, left with her children in the reserves, must combine the traditionally female rôle of mother and food-provider with the male rôle of father and decision-maker. The township mother, even if she is married, often finds herself the sole support of her family.

In four of the works which I shall look at, we can see that black men under stress frequently, almost customarily, vent their frustration on their wives, and far from feeling the right to protest publicly against such treatment, women feel obliged to conceal and endure it, often until the men's guilt and misery has driven them to criminal or even murderous acts. There seems to be a link between the oppression of black women by black men and the humiliation frequently suffered by black men in their working lives. Mary de Haas in her thesis on black marriage and divorce has drawn attention to this:

Although both sexes are equally affected (in fact women probably more so) by the prevailing socio-political climate, I suggest that men, because of the dominant role in which they have customarily been cast, find their ascribed inferior status more difficult to tolerate than women do and, in fact, direct much of their frustration against women. (1984: 314)

Mphahlele is the first township writer to record the phenomenon of a woman suffering at the hands of a man whose unhappiness seems to come from outside the marriage:

Mother did dressmaking for an African tailor just outside town. In the evenings she brewed beer out of corn malt to sell. The family's budget was all on her shoulders. She was hard-working and tough. She never complained about hard work. Father walked with a limp as one leg was shorter than the other. It had been broken by a wagon wheel in his teens. But he could cycle fast and he used to bicycle to work. Town was only two and a half miles away. He drank like a sponge, especially home-brewed beer which he had the tendency of commandeering and entertaining his friends with. My mother got very angry but couldn't do anything about it. No pleading could move my father. When he wanted *skokiaan* – brewed with yeast and water – he went to Cape Location, where Coloured people lived, just the other side of the Asiatic Reserve next to us. *Skokiaan* being much stronger than malt beer, my father often said threateningly to my mother: "I'll go drink *skokiaan* for you." But then he was so violent by nature that he didn't really need something to light a fire under him.

\* \* \* \*

"I don't want that man here again, hear?" my father said one evening.

"He's your friend and you know he comes to drink." She told us to go outside as she often did when she saw signs of a storm.

"Don't talk to me like that! Didn't your mother teach you never to answer back to your husband and lord?" we heard him say, through the window.

"You started, Moses." We looked through the window.

A crashing clap sent my mother down on her knees. (1959: 24–25)

Mphahlele witnesses this incident when he is a child, and even as an adult his sympathies are so strongly with his mother that he does not care to understand why his father refused to contribute to the family's support, drank excessively and assaulted his wife. He does notice his father's defence of his behaviour, or rather his assertion that his wife has no right to express indignation: "Didn't your mother teach you never to answer back to your husband and your lord?" This seems to be an appeal to tradition, but this husband's only real interest in tradition is to use it to legitimise his exploitation of his wife. The fact that "he couldn't laugh heartily" (1959: 25), though Mphahlele sees this glumness as inherited from his dour paternal grandmother, may well have been evidence of the frustration which de Haas suggests. The deliberate use of strong liquor which will release against his wife his pent-up violence – "I'll go drink *skokiaan* for you" – shows a pattern which we shall see elsewhere, that of the unhappy man who cites tradition, or simply assumes its validity in allowing him to exploit an all-enduring, all-providing wife. What is saddest in this selective use of tradition is that it usually produces from the wife an assent to this expectation, and prevents the timely self-assertion which might help both spouses.

Mphahlele's parents' marriage comes to an end when Moses, the husband, throws a pot of boiling curry at his wife. The resulting burns are severe enough to keep her in hospital for weeks, but they are the means of freeing

her and her children, because Moses is sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment, and there is presumably, though Mphahlele does not mention it, a divorce, since the father eventually remarries. The mother remains the sole support of their children.

Mphahlele recalls a childhood where women were the authority figures: "My grandmother was head of a large family," (1959: 34) he writes, though this could not be true in any legal sense, since she had three sons, the eldest of whom would be regarded by the law as her guardian. There was however no doubt in the minds of the family that she was the fount of traditional wisdom which was in fact a blend of respect for African custom and Protestant Christianity. "God'll help me make money to send my children to college," (1959: 43) she said as she brewed her beer.

The most interesting woman in the book is Aunt Dora, the younger sister of Mphahlele's mother. She is physically very strong, with a great deal of energy which often shows itself as aggression. Like the grandmother she contributes to the family income by brewing beer and taking in washing. She has adjusted to township life to the extent of dealing efficiently and without a male intermediary with all sections of the population – the Indian soft goods hawker, the principal of the school, the shopkeeper – even her male customers for beer. "What's a thing in trousers to me!" (1959: 79) she says, and to her divorced sister, "If that limping hyena called Moses had married me instead of you . . . he'd see trams for flying vultures by the time I'd done with him" (1959: 80).

Yet in Dora too there is conflict between her perception of her needs for survival in the township and the "traditional" sense that men should be masters. She is absolutely obedient to her husband; when she fights (and defeats) Abdool the shopkeeper, she submits that night to a severe beating. Mphahlele writes of his grandmother's disapproval of her daughter's fighting and of Dora's own unhappiness in the days that followed. Propriety says that she may not oppose men, at least not violently, even though Abdool was trying to cheat her and her family out of five shillings.

In *Looking Through the Keyhole*, N. Chabani Manganyi records an interview with Mphahlele in which they discuss his childhood in Marabastad:

MANGANYI: To get back to something you mentioned earlier about your relationship with your father. This is certainly one of the most crucial experiences in your life. I have often wondered whether this compassion and devotion to humanistic values is not perhaps related to a feminine identification.

MPHAHLELE: Mm hmm . . .

MANGANYI: Perhaps I should explain what I mean by that. The strong people who were the important people in your life during the formative stages, appear to have been your maternal grandmother, your maternal aunt and your mother.

MPHAHLELE: Mm humm, that's right.

MANGANYI: There are no indications really, not in anything that I have read, that there was a strong male presence in any sense.

MPHAHLELE: None . . . yes, that's so very true.

MANGANYI: And so, I have wondered whether your sensibility is not in some way connected to that identification.

MPHAHLELE: To that identification with a woman?

MANGANYI: Yes.

MPHAHLELE: Yes, now that you say it, I feel strongly so. When I think of strong people I don't think of men, I always think of women. (1981: 11)

Manganyi's suggestion is that the presence of strong women and the absence of a father figure has had a very positive value in Mphahlele's life, has in fact been related to the growth in him of the values which permeate his writing. In the same interview however Mphahlele mentions other possibilities for a boy in whose life only women are strong and adult males are typically delinquent:

"... my younger sister got married to a man who was just utterly useless. He was a graduate from Fort Hare and didn't lack education. He was quite an intelligent fellow but just bone lazy. He wanted to stay home and not go to work while she was working in factories and bearing children at the same time. (1981:11)

This brother-in-law eventually began to assault his wife. As in the case of his father, Mphahlele does not care to untangle the guilts and fears which lay behind this behaviour: did the brother-in-law, with the hopes to which high intelligence and a degree entitled him, find the work available to him humiliating? Did he fear the treatment he might receive on the city streets if he left the township? It is certain that he knew his group would not find his behaviour to his wife outrageous; there would be no general surprise when he failed to contribute to the family income, nor would there be general horror at the idea of a husband beating his wife.

Most township writers have been men, and it is rare for them to explore a woman's life, even momentarily, from within her consciousness. It may be that some remnant of the tribal separation between the lives of men and women makes such an exploration appear to a black male writer dangerous or distasteful. Whatever the reason, the pattern of the three works which I have chosen for my investigation of the need for a feminism among black South African women is that of a damaged male consciousness, the narrator's, perceiving and affecting the lives of others, especially women. I shall also discuss *Mhudi* by Sol T. Plaatje, because of my belief that in this work he was trying to suggest a new pattern of womanhood, appropriate to changed times. The three "township" works are *Blame Me On History* by Bloke Modisane, first published in 1963, *To Every Birth Its Blood* by Mongane Serote, published in 1981, and *Fools* by Njabulo S. Ndebele, published in 1983. I shall not attempt to be just to the intentions of the authors of these three works, all of which assume for the most part a male-centred world in which women are peripheral and passive; in all three however I shall be concerned to draw attention to the evidence that this belief (often accepted by women as well as men) is damaging to both sexes.

Although Western European man's sense of women, men and the world has been in many respects similar to this, there are distinctions to be made between the attitudes of urban black men and those of European men (in the sense of men who reside in Europe). In her thesis *Class, Race and Gender: The Political Economy of Women in Colonial Natal*, Josephine D. Beall

suggests that although black women in pre-colonial days were subordinate to men “they were important contributors to subsistence production” (1982: 59). The division of tasks between the sexes was strict, women being the cultivators and men involved in the care of cattle. When European influence began to be felt, missionary schools tended to teach that girls should limit themselves to “needlework, washing, ironing and other household duties” (1982: 84) and the civil authorities, in the persons of school inspectors, approved of this. When the ox-drawn plough was introduced, the taboo on women’s having contact with cattle began to exclude them from certain agricultural activities (1982:73). And because they were essential to their infants, migration to the towns was more difficult for them than for males. Nevertheless some did migrate: Beall speaks of them as

... among the most oppressed group in South Africa, a condition which persists to this day. What is significant, however, is that the roots of this oppression lay not only in colonial conquest and patriarchy, but in pre-capitalist forms of patriarchy as well. (1982: 90)

The combination of (conveniently retained) traditional attitudes and patriarchal/capitalist beliefs about the proper position of women is frequently visible in the writings of black men: women must, of course work, but they must not be part of the decision-making process. In their working lives they will be disadvantaged, but this disadvantaged position will not entitle them to feel indignant, nor do they deserve the compassion of others.

\* \* \* \*

It is fair, though inadequate, to call *Mhudi* an historical romance: it is a fiction set a century earlier than the writer’s own day. In his introduction to the Heinemann edition of the book, Tim Couzens points out that it is also a rewriting of history, with the purpose of showing that “the Great Trek was not the one central event in South African history, but merely another episode in the movement of South African tribes ... the tremendous upheaval and scattering of the tribes as a result of the Mfecane – the uniting of the many clans into the great Zulu military state – was, in many ways, a more important historical event” (1978: 7). Even more striking than the intention to oppose with another version of events the pro-colonial histories of the day is the will to investigate human, and especially marital relations. *Mhudi* herself is the heroine of the book, and though her husband Ra-Thaga must often act alone, Plaatje shows him as dependent on his wife’s good advice.

As in most black South African writing of this century, the influence of Christianity is evident in that monogamy is depicted as the highest form of marriage; the period which *Mhudi* and Ra-Thaga spend together in the wilderness after the massacre of their people is the happiest period of their lives because they are all to each other. At the beginning of the book, Plaatje describes the life of their people, the Barolong, in their city, Kunana, before it is destroyed. He enumerates the tasks of men – cattle-raising, hunting, blacksmith’s work – and of women – farming, cooking, basket making, mural

decoration – suggesting that although women’s tasks were heavier, they were performed with joy, and marriage especially was a happy state.

The massacre of their people forces Mhudi and Ra-Thaga to take refuge in the wilderness where they meet and assume that they are the only survivors of their families. Their union is therefore an end and a beginning – the end of the tribal separation of the sexes and their functions (Mhudi says she was busy with cookery when the alarm was given in Kunana: “Being preoccupied with my work I paid but passing attention to such masculine affairs” (1978: 39)) – and of that earlier, polygamous sense of marriage which saw it as a group of alliances between families. It is the beginning of a new kind of relationship, which the young couple mark in the name they give their home, Re-Nosi, meaning We-Are-Alone.

Away from families and tribe, although Ra-Thaga has the male task of hunting and Mhudi the female ones of cooking and beer-making, each is the counsellor, confidant and helper of the other. Mhudi kills the lion which her husband holds by the tail; except when she fears for him, she tends to be more venturesome than he is. Most striking is her independence of mind and Ra-Thaga’s acceptance of it: she believes that there must be survivors of the Barolong tribe and insists that they will be revenged on their enemy, Mzilikazi, until Ra-Thaga, who disagrees, is glad to change the subject. She is of course seen as exceptional; “the heroine of Motlhokaditse” Ra-Thaga calls her when he hears that it was she, with a group of other girls, who drove off a lion, but the point is made that girls are not cowardly by nature. When, later in the book, Ra-Thaga, now living with Mhudi amongst the Qoranna people, ignores his wife’s advice and trusts a man who tries to kill him in order to marry Mhudi, the result is nearly fatal to him, and he is only saved because of Mhudi’s intervention. It is Mhudi who discerns, when Ra-Thaga becomes friendly with de Villiers, the trekker, that although his fellow Boers are capable of kindness, they take a sadistic pleasure in punishing their black servants which has little to do with the guilt or innocence of their victims.

Even the happy ending to the subplot which deals with the separation and reunion of Mzilikazi and his favourite wife, Umnandi, suggests that Plaatje is recognising through them that monogamy is the only truly happy relationship between man and woman. When Mzilikazi has lost her and his armies have been defeated, he meditates:

That daughter of Mzinyato . . . was the mainstay of my throne. My greatness grew with the renown of her beauty, her wisdom and her stately reception of my guests. She vanished and, with her, the magic talisman of my court. She must have possessed the wand round which the pomp of Inzwinyani was twined, for the rise of my misfortune synchronized with her disappearance. Yet she was not the only wife in my harem. How came it about that all was centred in her? (1978: 172)

Plaatje was obviously making the point, via both the marriages, that social change, inevitably affecting the institution of marriage, was underway in South Africa, and that the new form of marriage might be even happier than



the earlier form. Tribal groupings, with their emphasis on bonds between members of the same sex and age-mates, were declining in importance and must continue to do so as blacks moved to the towns. The primary bond of adult life must be that between husband and wife and the wife must be encouraged to be inventive, resilient and brave if she is to be the partner and counsellor of her husband.

\* \* \* \*

Plaatje's belief about marriage appeared in print more than a generation before Bloke Modisane wrote his autobiography, which is both an account of how he longs for such a marriage and its impossibility, as he believes, for him. Ironically, Modisane's wife was Plaatje's granddaughter, and it is clear that he married her partly in the hope of a new, non-traditional marriage. The book places his dissatisfaction with his wife near the beginning, and his account of their courtship and of the strains in his own personality which made it impossible for any woman to make him happy come only much later. He speaks of his resentment of the fact that she is not intimate with his mother, that she cannot be "the ideal makothi, the African daughter-in-law":

Fiki came from a middle-class background of Coloured influence; her mother was Coloured, her father was a court interpreter, the son of the famous author, Sol T. Plaatje. There was a snobbishness about Fiki which perhaps was responsible for the relationship with Ma-Willie, who was a shebeen queen. (1986: 45)

In Chapter 13 Modisane tries to understand his own life and especially his marriage:

And as a true South African I am tempted to blame the emptiness of my life on history, and pretend a reason for the loneliness, the need for love and companionship; but these are diversions. I want acceptance in the country of my birth, and in some corner of the darkened room I whisper the real desire: I want to be accepted into white society. I want to listen to Rachmaninov, to Beethoven, Bartók and Stravinski; I want to talk about drama, philosophy and social psychology; I want to look at the paintings and feel my soul touched by Lautrec, Klee and Miró; I want to find a nobler design, a larger truth of living in literature. These things are important for me, they are the enjoyment of a pleasure I want to share. Somewhere there must be a woman who could look deep into beauty and hard at ugliness, who could feel a hurt and an injustice suffered by others as though it were her own.

I have felt too much, alone, and bled too deeply, alone; the being alone is unbearable. I am the eternal alien between two worlds; the Africans call me a "Situation"; by Western standards I am uneducated. If I had my life again, although I would select to be black, I would want a university education, to read philosophy, social psychology and history; in my loneliness I tried to learn too much and live too many lives, I tried to concentrate 2,000 years into thirty. Perhaps Dr Verwoerd is right: Natives should not be educated beyond certain forms of labour. The inadequate education I received is responsible for my unrequited hunger; if I had been the simple kaffir I would have found happiness

in my simplicity and appreciated the good things about my marriage and loved Fiki with the simple respect and the dignity with which my father and his father before him had survived. (1986: 218)

Sol Plaatje had understood that the life of “the simple kaffir” was dying: Modisane pushes this understanding further and demands that western civilisation, which is killing traditional ways, allow him complete entry. He wants to enjoy its arts and sciences and to embrace a woman able to understand him fully. Later in the same chapter he says, “I am able to admit that my marriage decomposed because Fiki is black; the women in the sex pilgrimage left me in a coma of screaming loneliness because they were black” (1986: 220).

Yet although he can see himself as a fringe person, stranded between the black township and the white suburbs, and acknowledging that it is for the white suburbs that he longs, he will not understand that the same or similar is true of Fiki. He writes at length of his own love-hate relationship with Sophiatown, but does not realise that for his wife, who has no childhood associations with it, it is unbearable. To make it bearable, she would have to turn into a township woman, tolerant of the dirt and the narrow space in which such women live, as well as of her husband’s promiscuity (Modisane makes casual mention of this throughout the book). She cannot: she goes with their child for long and frequent holidays with her parents in Natalspruit, and these absences estrange the couple further.

Modisane’s account of their courtship tells us that he was consciously looking for a partner like himself. Of the negotiations which preceded the wedding, he writes “. . . we conspired together, Fiki and I, to subvert African customs surrounding marriage” (1986: 225). Fiki’s father does not want lobola for his daughter: “the Modisanes had insisted on paying lobola, and Mr Plaatje, after being bulldozed into setting a price on his daughter, had – as a gesture of courtesy – asked for £25 lobola, the modesty of which had staggered my negotiators so profoundly they were constrained to have the figure repeated” (1986: 257).

Sol Plaatje’s son understands both the new and the old, and all appears propitious for the couple. Black and white friends join to celebrate the marriage at a gigantic wedding party at Ma-Willie’s house, but the happiness is momentary. Modisane cannot prevent himself from demanding the unquestioning acceptance of his foibles and his life style characteristic of a traditional wife (we must remember the doubtfulness of this sense of tradition) and when he does not find it in Fiki, goes elsewhere. He writes of a woman whom he calls Princess with whom he had an affair before and during his marriage:

“Her love remained constant, survived the marriage to Fiki and it was she I ran to when confused or uncertain about my marriage. She did not burden me with questions or demands, she was there when I wanted her, understood that it was Fiki I wanted to be married to.” (1986:45)

Seduced by passivity, Modisane clearly finds this absolutely undemanding

relationship a relief, but does not, when he writes of it, perceive that it is also an avoidance. He will not permit his women the desires and conflicts he has himself, even though he can never be satisfied with simplicity.

No black, urban writer of the post-war period has been able, as Plaatje was, to take as his subject a woman capable of bridging the gap from the old life to the new, but the form of Serote's *To Every Birth Its Blood* brings him closest to it. The novel is divided into two parts, the first centred on a single man, Tsi, actor and journalist, and the second dealing with a mixed group of men and women.

The first section of Part One shows us Tsi's married life with Lily. At first, when they arrive home together, Tsi looks at his wife with love, then he sends out for beer; the anxieties of life outside their home begin to press on them both, and he decides to go to the shebeen to meet men friends. He asks his wife for money:

"Where are you going?" She took me by surprise. I stood up, lost in thought, and played with my beard.

"I want to see the boys out there," I said.

"Take your key, I won't wake up to open for you."

I looked at her. I kissed her. She pushed me back.

"Don't over-drink," she said. "You know that you fight when you are drunk, and that breaks my heart."

"Drunk!"

"Put on your jersey, it's going to be cold outside," she said. I took my jersey and stood around.

"I can only give you two rands, no more," she said.

"Baby, you know those boys have been buying beer for me all this week. Be proud of your man!"

She looked at me with her mischievous eyes. She fought her laughter. "We have to pay permit tomorrow," she said, almost pleading.

"I will go dig the heap for that. Okay, give me five."

"Five?" she said, "Tsi, five?"

"I should be saying ten, you know." She looked at him with eyes saying, you are mad, ten? Never! I got four. (1981:5)

Many of the elements of the Mphahlele parents' relationship are present here: the idle, self-indulgent man, careless of household needs, the anxious woman, trying to withhold what she cannot afford to give. Tsi asks as of right: "I should be saying ten, you know." Their relationship is still one of love, but with anxiety on one hand and guilt and self-hatred on the other, it is easy to see how it will go.

Like Modisane, Tsi has a lover left over from his unmarried days, Tshidi, to whom he looks for unconditional sympathy when his marital behaviour produces too much guilt. He is more conscious than Modisane that the relationship is exploitative, though in other respects it is similar to Modisane's liaison with Princess:

"I had a future with Lily. Tshidi, as long as she allowed me to continue coming, sitting with her, talking, drinking tea, and ending up in all the kinds of position

our feelings dictated, encouraged herself to be doomed. I knew I was responsible if Tshidi was doomed. (1981:108)

Tsi's Christian parents reproach him bitterly for his treatment of his wife and speak with shame of his brother Ndo "always drunk, beating his wife" (1981: 105). Tsi himself, after his interrogation and torture, loses the will to make any further effort. The novel's point, as I see it, is that an individual consciousness, unsupported by a group (the Movement of Part Two) will succumb. Unreflected upon, apparently, by the novelist, is another point which he nevertheless illustrates, that women, though equally pressured and isolated, will survive, though the terms of their survival may be hard. Lily continues to go to work, Tshidi to support her child. Mary, Tsi's sister, is rejected by her parents, more severe to her than to their sons, when she bears an illegitimate child, but she survives, works as a cook in a white household, and brings up her son. Serote seems to assume that women's ability in Part One to survive is related to the fact that they are less politically aware than their men. If Lily, Mary, or women like them suffer humiliation at work or on the streets, he seems not to know of it.

Part Two of the novel shows the strength to which comrades can help each other, and the two politicised women, Dikeledi and Onalenna, are particularly effective. Dikeledi is herself unsupported by any individual. She works for political change as a journalist, until she is obliged to take refuge abroad, where, we gather, her work continues to be valuable. Onalenna, whose fiancé Yaone spends several years in America, is sustained in his absence by her love for him. Their reunion is happy, but shortly afterwards their comrade Oupa is killed. The scene which follows his funeral is a meeting between Tsi and Yaone in a shebeen, where Yaone asks if it is possible to love two women. He has spent the night with Molly, whom he met, we gather, the previous day in the shebeen. Tsi, who knows this pattern if anyone does, answers, "It is possible to fuck them, one at a time. I don't know anything about love in that context." He goes on to tell Yaone, "Not a single person is surprised or would be surprised by what you are saying you and Molly did last night, especially not you and her, so don't give me big deals, that is all" (1981: 354).

He is right: as we have seen, this kind of easy sexual contact, at least for men, is part of the township pattern. But since Serote has shown us Onalenna's loneliness in Yaone's absence (a rare entry into a woman's consciousness) he presumably feels that this infidelity is important in a new way. In part, it is a retrogression to Tsi's pattern, which continues as the two get drunk together and discuss the difficulties of loving when people are at risk and can die in agony as Oupa died. Part Two of the novel has begun with the disabling sense of bereavement experienced by John, another member of the Movement, after his fiancée, Nolizwe, is killed: the message seems to be that a revolutionary cannot afford too exclusive an attachment to one individual. Near the end of the novel, Onalenna, momentarily reunited with Yaone, leaves him sleeping, to travel back to Walmanstadt where she is needed.

\* \* \* \*

Zamani, the narrator of Njabulo Ndebele's novella *Fools*, which occupies almost half of the volume *Fools and Other Stories*, is a disgraced schoolmaster, once the terror of the children whom he taught. As a young man, he embezzled the funds of the local Anglican church, of which he was treasurer. When the loss was discovered, he claimed that his action was one of principle, not weakness: he wanted to ruin the church because he disagreed with Christianity. Nevertheless to avoid exposure he agreed to marry the clergyman's daughter, a registered nurse, for whom there was no other suitable husband in their small town. The marriage has been childless. Three years before the novella begins, he seduced a schoolgirl, who gave birth to his child. Despite the scandal, parents of schoolchildren asked for his re-employment because of his reputation as a disciplinarian, and he has taught ever since, full of misery and self-hatred.

His sins are not seen as having political causes, though in the context of other township writing it is clear that they are related to a particular society, itself politically produced and controlled. He and his wife Nosipho continue to live together, though he is virtually impotent with her. She ignores him as far as possible; no doubt her nursing makes her life bearable. He has tried to find comfort with other women and has apparently been unsuccessful. At the centre of the story is his relationship with Zani, the brother of the girl he seduced, who insists that he face the facts of his life, and who acts for him as a substitute son, young, rash and in danger, needing Zamani's help.

He discovers in the course of their relationship that Mimi, the schoolgirl mother of his child, has managed to continue her education. She lives in the house of her mother, Ma Buthelezi, who looks after the child and supports them all by selling beer. Ma Buthelezi is loving, understanding, generous: the brewing of beer is closely associated in *Mhudi*, *Down Second Avenue*, *Blame Me On History* and *Fools* with warm, nurturing qualities. Even in *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Aunt Miriam, the shebeen queen, is an affectionate, tolerant, though down-to-earth figure. Like the adulterous lover, such women are valued because they are generous, undemanding and unjudging.

*Fools* ends with Zamani's recognition that despite the interest and excitement he feels in the company of the young, he belongs with his wife Nosipho. Nosipho has already declared that she will remain with him, though she too has responded to the exciting possibilities for life which Zani seems to embody: "I have invested too many years of my life in what has all along been the inexplicable discomfort of living with you. No, I will not leave now" (1983: 258). She seems to have withdrawn mentally during his bad years, but to have waited for the change that would reunite them.

None of the township narratives allows for the possibility of women who are innovative as was Mhudi. The fact that his book is a romance of course allows Plaatje greater freedom to speculate: he is not obliged to relate the new kind of marriage which is his subject to particular social conditions, as are the township writers whom I have considered. But with the possible exception of Mphahlele, these writers resist the idea that women might be innovative, and resent both their impulse to judge their men and their understandable dissatisfaction. Divided themselves between a longing for change

and a sentimental nostalgia, men's strongest wish for women seems to be that they supply male weaknesses.

The reluctance to imagine women's consciousness which I mentioned earlier makes it difficult to understand from men's writing much more about women than they express in speech. De Haas describes a general belief amongst township residents that whatever the behaviour of the husband, it is the responsibility of the wife to make the marriage work (1984: 278). Perhaps because of this general belief, Ellen Kuzwayo, in her autobiography, *Call Me Woman*, is unable to write in detail about what seems to have been a cruel and exploitative husband:

My image of marriage was far removed from the torture I was exposed to. I went through physical and mental sufferings. Day by day I realised I was being humiliated and degraded, an experience that I have in recent years come to realise is suffered by many wives the world over, within different races, cultures and religions.

It is a great hardship to have your trust shaken in someone so very close to you. Even now, I find I cannot write in detail about it. (1985:124)

Kuzwayo, though she is eventually forced to leave her marriage, does not sue for divorce. When her husband does so, she refuses to defend herself – "I had no intention of going into court to disclose publicly the shocking, hurting and embarrassing experience I had suffered at my husband's hands" (1985: 141). She does not even contend for custody of her sons, petitioning only for access to them.

Kuzwayo is in some ways a liberated woman; all her life long she has been self-determining, and the fact that she refuses on such an important issue to oppose her husband is indicative of attitudes in her community. She later makes a very happy marriage and is reunited with her children, but it is notable that this energetic, determined, intelligent woman uses her qualities, during the period recorded in the autobiography, amongst women's organisations and on women's causes. It seems likely that even she has great difficulty in being innovative in an environment where men are present.

The preponderance of male writers over female is not the only reason why the innovative woman rarely appears in Black South African writing: Black women writers seem to be wary of protest against the status quo in relations between the sexes and anxious to show their adherence to traditional habits of deference to men. Miriam Tlali, for example, in *Muriel at Metropolitan*, makes exactly this point: the office messenger, an elderly man, offers to shop for Muriel:

"Would you like me to bring you anything from the shops, my child? Don't be afraid to send me."

"No thanks, Johannes," I said.

I was reluctant to send him. How could I? He was a man and I was a woman. According to our customs, a woman does not send a man. We reserve a place, an elevated place, for our men. (1975: 21)

Tlali's embarrassment arises partly from the fact that she disapproves of the way in which white women employees sent Johannes on frivolous personal errands; it is a gesture of respect towards a man who may regard himself as humiliated in the course of his work. Generous understanding of men's suffering characterises in Black writing women's attitudes at their best: in a recent play, workshopped by black women, a scene depicts a man's irresponsible appropriation of his wife and daughter's earnings. The wife is angry at first and then explains to the daughter that her father has become a greedy drunkard only since he lost his job after an accident. The play as a whole is about women's sufferings and women's strength – especially the latter, which it celebrates – but like all the township writing considered in this essay, it makes no suggestion that the relations between the sexes could or should change. Compassion, understanding and acceptance are attitudes required of good women towards men.

Solidarity between members of an oppressed community in the face of their oppressors is naturally held to be valuable, but the solidarity between the sexes presented in Black South African writing of our day involves for women acceptance of exploitation by their men, and if de Haas, as an analyst of relations between the sexes, is right, the domination/subjection relationship between men and women produces in real life estrangement, not solidarity. In these circumstances the failure of the literary imagination to admit the possibility that women might determine their own lives to some extent and intervene productively in men's becomes a serious matter.

Black Consciousness and the other movements allied to it which have influenced Black writers of the last forty years are, it should be remembered, conservative in the sense that they encourage resistance to the notion that Western lifestyles are superior to traditional ways, and it seems likely that an undesired effect of their conservation has been to repress the innovative impulse in women which Sol Plaatje so valued. It may be that they have, also inadvertently, provided justification for the subjection of wives to husbands which has allowed men under stress to abuse their wives. It has become necessary to emphasise that the lives of women, as well as those of men, have changed, as Plaatje knew they would change, but not as he hoped. Their present relationship to men is not the traditional one, any more than it is a desirable or a productive one for them or their communities. Black writing, whether inhibited by an obsolete sense of propriety or by more complex constraints, is failing them by refusing to record or explore their experiences and their attitudes as fully as it does those of men.

## Note

1. In a review of a biography of Olive Schreiner, for example, Nadine Gordimer writes:

I suppose one must allow that she had a right to concern herself with a generic, universal predicament: that of the female sex. During her restless, self-searching years in England and Europe, and her association with Havelock Ellis, Eleanor Marx, Karl Pearson, women's suffrage and English socialism in the 1880s, she studied intensively theories on race and evolution and participated in progressive

political and social movements; but feminism was her strongest motivation. Yet the fact is that in South Africa, now as then, feminism is regarded by people whose thinking on race, class and colour Schreiner anticipated, as a question of no relevance to the actual problem of the country – which is to free the black majority from white minority rule. (1983:97)

## References

- Beall, Josephine D. 1982. *Class, race and gender: the political economy of women in colonial Natal*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- De Haas, Mary. 1984. *Changing patterns of black marriage and divorce in Durban*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Gordimer, Nadine. 1983. The prison-house of colonialism. (Review of Ruth First and Ann Scott's *Olive Schreiner*.) In: Cherry Clayton (ed.) *Olive Schreiner*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill.
- Kuzwayo, Ellen. 1985. *Call me woman*. London: The Women's Press.
- Manganyi, N. Chabani. 1981. *Looking through the keyhole*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Modisane, Bloke. 1986. *Blame me on history*. Johannesburg: Donker (first published 1963).
- Mphahlele, Ezekiel. 1959. *Down second avenue*, London: Faber.
- Plaatje, Sol T. 1978. *Mhudi*. London: Heinemann (first published 1930).
- Serote, Mongane. 1981. *To every birth its blood*. Johannesburg: Ravan.
- Tlali, Miriam. 1975. *Muriel at metropolitan*. Johannesburg: Ravan.