

# The Politics of Protest in the Post-Apartheid Poetry of Seitlhamo Motsapi and Mxolisi Nyezwa

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## Abstract

This paper critically examines the manifestation of protest agitations in post-apartheid South African poetry. The paper considered the insightful reflections of two South African poets on the influence of the apartheid administration and other forms of racial profiling and segregation. It is pertinent to note that the paper does not only record the outburst of these writers against apartheid; the crux of the paper is channeled towards the exposition of the perspectives of the selected poets about the traumatic experience of apartheid and the obnoxious nature of the post-apartheid experience. One collection of poetry from Seitlhamo Motsapi and Mxolisi Nyezwa was selected for critical and literary analysis. The paper considers the expression of disaffection by writers in their portrayal of the struggles for socio-political sanity and socioeconomic equanimity after the dehumanizing apartheid regime. The paper posits that writers should continually engage the thesis of post-apartheid and evoke the consciousness of the masses to the nefarious realities of their circumstances. The paper concludes that Africans need to realize their distinctions and peculiarities by looking inwards and reflecting on new ways to chart a new course for future generations.

## Keywords

Postcolonial literature, Protest, Post-apartheid South Africa, Politics, South-African poetry

# The Politics of Protest in the Post-Apartheid Poetry of Seitlhamo Motsapi and Mxolisi Nyezwa

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The history of African literature cannot be wholly discussed without understanding the realities of the African society. Perspectives of writers of literary pieces are also important for shaping a whole image of the historical moments that Africans went through. There is an inextricable nexus between African experiences and African literature (Chapman 5; Izevbaye 131). African literature examines various forms of oppression in African societies, and the literary productivity in South Africa increased dramatically with the political change from apartheid to multi-racial democracy in 1994 (Adebiyi 71). This surge gave South African literature a multidimensional outlook that was not only focusing on racial and gender thematic preoccupations but predominantly addressed the political landscape.

The apartheid mentality is based on the assumption that a handful of people have the absolute right to decide what all the others may do, read, write, think, or be. Moyana states that “the country is built on the principle of bastardization. There are Africans that can speak no African language at all (92)”. This prompted various revolutionary writers to take a stand against apartheid. Moreover, Chielozone Eze argues that Nelson Mandela’s greatest achievement lies in giving South Africa and the world a new moral compass, one that recasts the narrative of postcoloniality into the model of relationality (238). According to Mazisi Kunene, Afrikaans literature has shed the curse of Europeanism in literature except insofar as it is a factor of relation in the world context (14).

Anifowose opines that African writers have been compelled to protest against violence in South African social setting, which is based on discrimination and predicated upon a philosophy of political repression and a denial of human rights to the African (67). Hence, literary writers have made their works exhibitions of protest against the situations which warranted conflicts in the South African nation. Writers such as Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, Peter Abrahams and Nadine Gordimer are among the writers whose works could be said to have greatly contributed to the protest against apartheid policy, which in 1994, was eventually abolished in South Africa.

The abolition of the dehumanizing regime did not translate to the end of critical and creative interactions through seminal literary pieces by South African poets. South African poets continued to engage the socio-political situation of the South African society to provide insights into the state of the post-apartheid South African society (Sibanda 73). This became imperative to usher in the renaissance to the subjugated and maligned entity. The society had to commit itself to a life of identity reclamation and reassertion, and the traumatic experience of apartheid compelled writers to reflect on the realities they endured (Adonis 11). This consciousness paved way for a post-apartheid literary tradition that depicted the horrors and catastrophic effects on the psyche of South African society. South African poetry continually engages the discourse of the impacts of the apartheid regime on the psyche of the people and the indelible imprints of the regime. In 1994, apartheid was officially abolished. This event exposed literary writers to the need to create a new course or map for the literary landscape post-apartheid South Africa. The selection of these poets for consideration is inspired by the era of their literary productivity.

Motsapi and Nyezwa's poetry publications were released after the post-apartheid period. Hence contemporary South African poets create a literary representation of the widespread post-apartheid strifes and corruptions in South African society. These representations will be discussed from the perspectives of Seithlamo Motsapi and Mxolisi Nyezwa. Collection of poetry from each of the selected poets will be critically analyzed to identify their perspectives about the post-apartheid South African society. It is expected that the South African society which hitherto had to grapple with racial discrimination and economic segregation would have been able to reorganize and re-strategize for a better future which would be for the growth and unequivocal development of all and sundry. However, the reverse seems to be the case because the inability to reorganize and rebrand a socially disoriented society gave rise to different subtle manifestations and nostalgia about a sinister heritage.

As a post-colonial nation, South Africa is condemned to share imperialist-influenced historical and cultural experiences. The pertinent questions are how does culture, literary in particular, currently interpret the post-apartheid developments in the country? To what extent do the apartheid realities perpetuate themselves in the post-apartheid literary culture? These and other germane questions are discussed in the textual analysis of the selected collections of Seithlamo Motsapi and Mxolisi Nyezwa. Some selected poems are analyzed to reflect how these poets represented the social issues that plagued the post-apartheid South African society.

### **Politics of Protest in Seithlamo Motsapi's *Earthstepper***

Motsapi and Nyezwa constitute a special category of advocates who bear their personal burdens in addition to those of the generality of the society for whom they speak. Motsapi's *Earthstepper/ The Ocean Is Very Shallow* exhibits a distinctive feature of an oppressed people, who are independent of the sinister regime of racial discrimination but are still going through all forms of segregation and discrimination. The rampant notion that post-apartheid South African society is free from all forms of racial discrimination is confuted through the scathing attack on the neo-colonialist and systemic or structural inequalities or imbalance that still existed. This collection of poetry reconfigures the misconstrued imagination of the populace that the post-apartheid South African society is free for all to express social norms and beliefs without the fear of being

maligned or segregated against. Motsapi believes that socio-political and economic equality should go hand in hand.

The progress of the rainbow nation can only be realistic if all aspects of peoples' living experiences witness holistic growth and development. Motsapi's disgust and subsequent protest against the deceptive thesis which the rainbow nation offered are buttressed in his quest for 'bread', 'rainbow' and 'lamp' in "gossamer". The symbolic request is a protest against the perspective that the subjugated minority only wanted racial equality or recognition. They deserve more than just recognition in their homeland but active involvement in the socio-political affairs of their country. They should be allowed to chart a course for their own future and that of their unborn generation. The poet believes that it is only through this that real peace and tranquillity can be achieved. The absence of these cogent developmental factors suggests that the joy expressed during the dissolution of apartheid was a premature one.

Motsapi's compositions depict the challenges of nationhood and the inauspicious circumstances in which the marginalised majority group were made to live in. The declaration of the definite end to racial discrimination did not bring succour to the people. The poet relates this through the use of imagery that vividly depicts inhumanity and symbols which relates the desperate reality of the black majority. This desperation is captured in the poet's expression of disgust towards the rapid capitalist evolution which inadvertently influences the loss of traditional (spiritual) values. These norms gave the people a sense of belonging and also enabled them to live simple and worthwhile lives.

An almost forgotten acquaintance  
was in town recently  
I noticed that it started raining  
just as he ambled in  
I remember him as a simple man (*Earthstepper*, 2).

Chrisman's perspective on Motsapi's poetic style posits that the political urgency of the poet's is vivid and is devoid of reckless or mindless rhetorical posturing or aesthetic banality. Motsapi's poetic vision commits to reeling out fresh imagery, complex conceits and stylistic rigor which enables the aura of originality and deep creativity (33). The simplicity at which the poetic persona conducted his affairs undoubtedly endears him to the heart of the poet. However, with the rapid changes that realignment brought as a result of the post-apartheid restructuring, the simple man (black South African) needs to snap out of his ordinary dreams which gave his life meaning in favour of quack and inauspicious dreams which the system offers him:

growing up, we all wanted  
to be doctors, lawyers and teachers  
so the blood could ebb out of the village  
my friend had much more sober dreams  
he asked the heavens to grant him (*Earthstepper*, 2)

Motsapi's disgust is further buttressed through his protest against the materialistic visions that post-apartheid brought upon the South African society. This materialistic vision of selfishly acquiring wealth of economic means makes it impossible for the society to achieve progression which the dissolution of apartheid should have offered. The loss of communal values creates an atmosphere of crooked individualism.

The poet's protest against the status quo is also relayed through his diction and style. The complication of meaning and indeterminate use of diction. The poet's choice of title indicates the complications and anomalies that the whole collection sought to represent in the minds of the readers. The 'earthstepper' and 'the ocean is very shallow' are linguistic choices that indicates the progression from apartheid disillusionment to the deceptive post-apartheid grandeur. The earthstepper steps on earth as if he owns it but is consciously reminded of the fact that he cannot really stake claim to it. However, the reality eventually dawns on him when he realises that the ocean which should give him respite after the sore of stepping on earth is also shallow. Hence he cannot really feel the respite of getting into the ocean because of the shallow nature of the ocean. The poet's juxtaposition of the conditions of the apartheid regime and the post-apartheid system is striking and heart-breaking.

Apart from conscious linguistic fragmentation, Motsapi's piece reflects dissonant aesthetic forms which questions the notions expressed in post-apartheid discussions and reflections. Meyer identifies these notions as individualistic models of liberated blackness. Thus Motsapi's expression of disgust is not solely targeted against apartheid legacies but also a protest against political organizations he cannot condone (47).

The protest against this individualistic dispensation which is a contrast against the core of pre-apartheid communal system is emphatically discussed in Chalamanda's comment about the titling technique adopted by Motsapi in this collection. Chalamanda holds the opinion that Motsapi's contributes immensely to the protest mentality that runs through the whole collection (92). The dehumanizing apartheid situation of the black South African is aptly represented in "the sun used to be white". This poem considered the hatred and contempt that the black South African had to endure and is still enduring as a result of his skin pigmentation. The black South African needs to understand the criticality of his condition in order for him to navigate through the debilitating conditions with ease and auspiciousness. Motsapi redirects the black South African to the disgusting and debilitating aspect of his historical heritage in order for him to objectively determine the reality of his presence and create a springboard for his futuristic aspirations:

we were born blk in a time & planet  
where blk petered into absences and voids  
where blk was the disco/dant melody  
of the primal song of emptiness... (*Earthstepper*,12).

The sinister nature of the situation of the black South African even after the destruction of the apartheid regime is emphasised in the lines above. The black South African goes through a contracted life span through which his aspiration cannot be realized. The systemic structure of stifling and discouragement of the post-apartheid era prevented many from excelling. The poet protests against the deceptive notion that the end of apartheid is surely the end of victimisation and segregation. Hence, the end of apartheid is definitely the beginning of systemic apartheid. The systemic nature of the post-apartheid deception was given impetus by the destruction of the cultural foundations of the society.

These foundations undoubtedly created social and cultural cohesion for the black South African to thrive before the apartheid regime. However, the disruption of this foundation left a lot of negative effects which could not be easily corrected even after end of the apartheid system. Consequently, post-apartheid South Africa is compelled to seek a new way of navigating the course established by the apartheid system. This new way will

ensure that post-apartheid South Africa will be able to reassert itself and evolve. Apart from this, the collection also portrays the social and cultural disorientation that the apartheid system left South Africa in. The South African apartheid experience is vividly depicted as a sociological and cultural battle which should not have been allowed in the first place. The legacy of this destructive engagement still ravages the post-apartheid South Africa even after the destruction of the regime.

[...] the scowl of the sun and the sneer of the skies  
Lacerating mah history into a scarred holler... (*Earthstepper*, 13).

The poet creates a feeling of unease and emotional travail for the patriotic and segregated black South African by establishing the racist ideologies as cancerous nuances powerful to lacerate the poetic persona's history into a scarred holler. Motsapi displays his disgust towards the ills of the apartheid system which realistically has continually becloud any form of meaningful evolution during the post-apartheid era.

Motsapi's collection enjoys critical acclaim due to the objective and self-critical nature of the poems in the collection. Motsapi makes a case for self-reflection and reappraisal by black South Africans who are caught in the throb of identity crisis.

blkness can be a betrayal or  
a shuttling blaze of glory rending the sky...(*Earthstepper*,14)

In the poet's view, the achievement of freedom from the oppressive apartheid regime can only be realistic if some foundational anomalies are corrected. His collection suggests that he awfully detests the premature perspectives generated in the post-apartheid era which have prevented the black South African to understand that a lot still needs to be done while negotiating the new course the end of the apartheid regime offers. He decries the legacies of the apartheid regime and the indelible influence it has on the post-apartheid South African psyche.

my teeth red  
from eating too many profanities...(*Earthstepper*,14).

This metaphorical presentation of the racially and culturally suppressed black South African underpins the poet's comprehension of the sinister legacies of the apartheid regime in the post-apartheid era. The poet is succinct in his identification of the inauspicious reality of celebrating the rise of a rainbow nation which unfortunately has to grapple with the effect of 'eating too many profanities'.

Moreover, apart from having to nurse the sinister effect of eating too many profanities, the black South African also needs to bear with the distortion of mindset and psychological disorientation that the consumption of the profane things magnifies.

i fed the mendicants no hope  
sang them no sugar or salt  
i forgot to wash their feet  
i did not put enough brother  
in the handshake...(*Earthstepper*, 28).

The poet's visionary comprehension of the grandly publicized deceit of freedom from apartheid and the end to institutionalized or systemic oppression makes him bearish in his approach to the funfair that characterized the new era. He, unlike others feels mystified that the end of apartheid is the just the prelude of the legacies of apartheid regime.

The accuracy of the despondency that characterized the post-apartheid era is aptly captured in the scatological reference to the dearth in the expression of creativity and auspicious visions. Motsapi is convinced that the political class continues to upset the development of creative expressions because of the fear of critical appraisal. This trend will comprehensively defeat the ambition of cultural promotion and societal development because the essence of critical examination is majorly aimed at this.

However, the poet is not overtly critical of the efforts at hybridizing the nature of the arts which metaphorically symbolizes cultural and traditional aesthetics. The poet did not also mince words when he asserts that the hybrid nature might not really coexist without negative influence and redefinition of the status quo. The writer depicts his dissatisfaction with the hybrid approach by asserting that it is only a medium of underestimating the cultural and aesthetic essence of pan-Africanism.

For the masterplan is not a flag or two  
up the invisible masts of rebirths  
it's more than the solid pre-harmony  
of shrieks & screams  
as we holler our thunder over the wounds  
it's not the comical contentedness  
of your own bucketful of the ocean  
love is in the receding wave of the heart  
the cool slink from the heart  
into the embrace of the mesenja  
& though the ocean clamours into a roar  
though the waters invoke the drowsy spirit  
of thunder  
the ocean is very shallow  
a time short like loss  
a mountain low like hate  
the ocean is very shallow...(Earthstepper, 44).

The poet's protest against the nexus between the nefarious apartheid regime and the deceptive post-apartheid respite runs through this collection. The poet showcases his ideologies and hope for an ideal society which is free from the baggage of apartheid reign and the deception that characterized the post-apartheid era.

### **Protest in Mxolisi Nyezwa's *Malikhanye***

Mxolisi Nyezwa's contribution to the post-apartheid South African discourse is made endearing due to the precision of his imagery and the succinct use of surreal and stark juxtapositions. His comprehension of the post-apartheid South African society is relayed through his apt expression of notions of grieve and cruel optimism of hope recounts the post-apartheid living experiences of South Africans from the perspective of social-economic despair (Penfold, 234). The experiences of black South Africans during

the sinister apartheid set them back economically. However, the dissolution of the apartheid structure was believed to be a veritable process towards renaissance and rejuvenation in all spheres of the black South African lives. From the account of Nyezwa in *Malikhanye*, it seems this auspicious expectation and aspiration did not see the light of day. The poet discusses the contemporary issues that the post-apartheid typified. The capacity of the poet to document these sociopolitical concerns aligns his visions to Motsapi. Sole commends Nyezwa's poetic vision by likening it to that which

evokes a vision which is deeply, but never merely,  
personal, and which paradoxically weaves a web of  
wide-ranging, objective patterns. At the same time, the  
interplay and disjunctures between the images used,  
and the contexts and emotions these evoke, demand  
constant reader participation and openness...  
(*Malikhanye* 14)

This poetic indoctrination enables Nyezwa to be able to create heart rendering pieces about the reality in a post-apartheid South African world. His determination to damn the consequences of his scathing attacks on the thesis endears him to the heart of black South Africans who are willing to seek, learn and change the truth of their existence. The collection of poetry under analytical exposition in this study consist of three parts. The thematic focus of these sections highlights the reality of Nyezwa's life as a microcosm of the living experience of the average black South African. This collection reflects the precarious nature of politics and individual existence in the post-apartheid South African society. The collection highlights the devastation wrought by modern ideologies like capitalism on the cultural being of the people. The poet denounces the parasitic legacies of post-apartheid which have made it unrealistic for people to live in a society that is un-bordered and un-striated. Cummiskey recounts that Nyezwa's poetry invokes uniqueness which stems from extraordinary use of ordinary languages which depicts the global manifestations of human lives (1). In "heavens prisons" the poet portrays a universe which is divided against itself due to the gains of imperialistic and capitalist ideologues.

the universe is divided  
and subdivided  
like the shelves  
of an empty cupboard  
heckled into parties...(Malikhanye, 46).

Hence, the lowly citizens or the proletariats find themselves as the mercy of precarious living. The emptiness of the daily lives of the ordinary citizens is amplified by the imbalance of the legal system which more often than not favours the rich strata of the society at the expense of the common man. Hence, the equanimity and justice which should have been prevalent in a society that prides herself as a just and racially and economically balanced society, were farfetched. The poet explicated the rot in the rainbow nation where all colours were meant to complement one another but are realistically antagonizing one another. Though the metaphorical depiction of the nation as a 'free band of marching mourners'. The exploitation of daily experiences as a tool for the portrayal of the realistic experience of the post-apartheid South African society.



Slasha, and Nixon, maintain that the Nyezwa's collection showcases the capacity of the poet to make the unseen very conspicuous and relatable through his language strategies and techniques (2). According to them, these strategies ensure that readers are required to critically appraise the situations presented in the poetry collections in order to understand the causes and hegemonies.

'In every house' the disturbing nature of the post-apartheid South African society is aptly depicted in the diction, symbolism and imagery employed by Nyezwa. The poet personalizes the experiences of the black South African in a post-apartheid as one which characterized by glorified and beautified misery where 'men gullibly hang their misery on the wall'. These miseries are disguised as achievements worth celebrating in every South African household. The eventual realization of the failure of hopes and aspirations makes the ideology expressed in 'a burning sea' valid. The poet gives comprehensive account of the failure of the desires of South Africans before the dissolution of apartheid. The auspiciousness which should have brought solace to the plight experienced during racial segregation turned to 'a burning sea' which typifies nothingness and meaninglessness.

the wine in the glass fills up and slowly spills over  
suddenly everything falls into place  
all my aching agonies  
hurry up to nothing...( *Malikhanye*, 42)

The existential existence in the post-apartheid South African society is dominated by unpredictability and uncertainty. The lofty aspirations nurtured when the idea of the apartheid was mooted became a stringent task to execute because the optimism becomes a fleeting idea when the reality of post-apartheid dawned on the South Africans. It is evident that the prefix 'post' will not translate to events after the dissolution of the apartheid system but just a time after apartheid where nothing has changed.

now I understand the world  
I know the world is shallow  
with its own fine sea  
with its water and minerals  
and so little has changed... ( *Malikhanye*, 14).

Another area which has not changed is the level of disregard for the welfare of the citizenry. The urge to increase financial gains sacrificed the health of the people who imminently have to 'forget to breathe' because of the pollution wrought by industrialization. The ecocritical concerns expressed by the poet in 'forget to breathe' amplifies the manifestation of perpetual violence against healthy living. Hence it is a figurative expression of the institutionalized aggression of the privileged few who had access to the economic structure of the society against the majority who are alienated from good life. As a social realist who is committed to not only recognising the ills of the post-apartheid world but also exploring means of navigating through the ills seamlessly, he recommends that the lost child which is a symbol for the pristine pre-apartheid existence must never be forgotten. Apart from this, it is also crucial for the new pattern to be critically analysed in order to identify the positives of the imperfect nature of change in the society. This imperfect nature of change connects the poetic persona to nature

which gives sustenance and hope for a renewed future. Hence, the urge to keep searching for meaning is very pertinent.

listen, for once from a distance  
this blue earth sings its guilt to a silent storm  
this guilty earth resounds its depleted conscience  
to the raging eye of the desert... (*Malikhanye*, 66)

In 'song of beauty' the poet discusses the effects of this perpetual search for meaning through the discussion of the inauspicious reality the journeying to the deduction of meaning presents. Although, he captures some of these extra-terrestrial to be beyond the control of mere mortals, he believes that the protest perspective that should be maintained in order to exploit the situation is to assume a position of self-belief. Hence, the poet firmly decries the simplistic posture of acceptance of fate with a jarring image of existence with the possibility of violence and chaos to achieve equanimity.

but if you have to know  
last night I didn't sleep, i dreamt of dying  
i went out into the night and planted seedlings  
and the night was diseased  
all pitiful and dreadful ailments yelled at me.

but for me it is enough to say i'm no longer dead, but live!  
it suffices to say the universe also sprouts its tentacles of blood  
even the rich man charts a clear path, from the river to the sea  
even today my ulcers burn.

for now I'm no longer dead but live in the soil's core  
the mist of the land covers my sins...  
now listen to me, for there's no one outside...(Malikhanye, 53).

Nyezwa's poetic deftness in the deployment of a surreal atmosphere with relatable imagery adds to the beauty of his craft. Allan, 2012 recounts that Nyezwa ensures that relatable and ordinary images are used to capture intense and brutal meanings (4). Hardy, 2019 also contends that Nyezwa's poetry goes a long way to fill dead things (archaic images/languages) with a new lease of life through unconventional and metaphorical utilization of lexicons (52). The politics of protest in Nyezwa's collection is not only from a thematic point of view. The protest against the thesis of hypocrisy is also found in the stylistic variations through employment of irregular imagery and lexical ambiguity. Little wonder, Kim and Miller, 2018 contend that language has the potential to address the increasing level of discord and precarity in the society.

*Earthstepper/ the ocean is very shallow* and *Malikhanye* are collections of poetry that serve as media of expressing the thoughts and feelings of the poet against the apartheid system of government in South Africa. The body of work is written to express the inhuman inequality based on the colour of the skin during the apartheid era and how these sinister disregard for humanity have continued to rear her ugly head in the post-apartheid era. The poets introduce the readers to a world full of injustice. The pieces become more than expressions of the personal experiences of the poets but a general problem of the post-apartheid South African society which the poets are just microcosms

of. Although, it can be argued that the poets may not give a definite solution to the problems identified in the collections, however it is instructive to note that the identification of these anomalies is a pointer to the fact that the creative awareness of the poets is geared towards liberation and emancipation.

## Conclusion

This paper examined how Motsapi and Nyezwa view the post-apartheid in South African society. It considers the various forms of oppression in the South African society during the apartheid period which brought about the centralized theme of protest in South African literature. However, the thematic focus of the paper was channeled towards identifying the notions of these poets on the unrealistic end of apartheid. The paper argues that the post-apartheid era which was meant to offer solace to the rainbow nation was just a moment in history that was filled with lip service and idealistic notions which never saw the light of day. The poets highlight the various forms of oppression and misadministration in the South African society which are still manifesting in the post-apartheid South African society. The discussed collections present a bi-directional protest as well as the rhythms of protest flickering from the opposing races. The poets represent the sinister effects of apartheid to have influenced the post-apartheid stratification of the society against the masses by the privileged few. The collections discussed could be seen as revolutionary alternatives which are meant to spur the people of South Africa into action. Although South Africa got her independence in 1994, the literature of South Africa has not yet ceased to bear protest as the post-independence texts being produced in South Africa deal with the betrayal of the people's hope after the long-awaited independence. The multiplicity of thematic preoccupations in post-apartheid South African Literature illustrates how political change affects the country's protest psyche in literary expression. This multiplicity, triggered by the new political realities, defines the trajectory which is revolutionary and protest-like in South African literature.

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