
“bodies starved of the city’s pulse”: The Post-Apartheid Urban Space in Sihle Ntuli’s *Stranger*

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Abstract

Twenty years after apartheid, the township has remained a recurrent feature in black South African literature attaining a metaphorical status for the black experience. In post-apartheid imaginary, it has become the site for the interrogation of the new South Africa and what it means to the black identity in South Africa’s multiracial society with a history of economic, geographical and psychological restrictions in the background. Sihle Ntuli’s poetry in the collection Stranger (2015) has reimagined the South African township by painting images of struggle, poverty, drinking, crime and violence as features of that space in ways that question the meaning of the national trajectory. In this paper, I discuss the poetry’s explorations of the imbrications of the self and world, the tension between survival and the script of national and capital progress, and the collusion of the temporalities of the past and present in what would seem as a persistence of apartheid.

Keywords: post-apartheid; apartheid; urbanity

1.0 Introduction

Apartheid’s belief in racial difference as primordial rather than artificial was inscribed boldly on the country’s geography, or better, cartography, as racial difference was the basis for the legislations that began the massive nationwide fragmentations of space. The clamour for the fall of apartheid was therefore a call for the collapse of the spatial borders that had not only separated races, but excluded other members of the society from the economic empowerment and political freedom that they were entitled to as South Africans. This was why there was so much expectation when apartheid policies were reversed. At least, this meant people would be able to move and live across the country without any restrictions regardless of race. This also meant not only access to areas denied before, but the freedom to be a part of the institutions and aspects of the economy previously inaccessible to the country’s ‘wretched of the earth’. About two decades after the fall of apartheid, however, the apartheid city is believed to have persisted despite the overwhelming significations of change in the different sectors of the society.¹ It is this persistence of apartheid that I intend to discuss in selected poems from Sihle Ntuli’s collection, *Stranger* (2015). I explore how Ntuli handles the complexities of the new South Africa in which so much has changed and much has remained from the apartheid past. Sarah Nuttall has described this *now* of post-apartheid realities as one that invites a more encompassing approach to the persistence of apartheid without neglecting “the extent of the transformations that have taken place” (731). To do this, I look at three poems which represent the post-apartheid urban space as site for precarity, disillusionment and despair in the midst of political and economic transformations.

¹ See Oliver Wainwright. “Apartheid ended 20 years ago, so why is Cape Town still ‘a paradise for the few’?”. *The Guardian*, 30 April 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/apr/30/cape-town-apartheid-ended-still-paradise-few-south-africa>

Before I go on, I should like to say a word on the term *post-apartheid*. The concept has largely been regarded in a temporal sense, as a time-marker for the period after the fall of apartheid. While this is so, I would prefer to look at the prefix *post* as not restricted to *after*, but as a marker that seeks to destabilize binaristic ways of thinking. According to Homi Bhabha,

If the jargon of our times – postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism – has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the “post” to indicate sequentiality [...] or polarity [...]. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restlessness and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. (Bhabha 6)

It is this understanding of post-apartheid that Nuttall seeks, as seen above. The prefix *post* should not be limited to a temporal marker or an opposition but viewed in the way the *present*, what Nuttall calls the *now* (731), becomes a point of intersection between apartheid and the period that is supposed to mark its end.

2.0 “Kwa Mashu F Section Bus Stop”: A Passenger Existence

South African literature from the days of apartheid has utilized the travel motif via recurrent symbolic images of trains and buses, and this usually in connection to the urban space. L. Wright writes about the place of the train in South African poetic imagination contending that the train image has very strong political dimensions. Arthur Nortje’s poetry written in the 1960s, for instance, has treated transit motifs recurrently depicting the road or railway as the middle space that questioned the spatial fragmentations of apartheid. Ntuli’s poem “Kwa Mashu F Section Bus Stop”, an addition to the South African passenger canon, presents us with a vision of the post-apartheid township as a space of precarity and transit. The poem captures a moment at the KwaMashu F Section Bus Stop in which the speaker meditates on the vacillations, aspirations and alienations of the inhabitants of this community. In the background of this depiction is the history of the KwaMashu township as space developed by the apartheid government to accommodate the black people who were removed from other parts of Durban.² This idea of unsettlement and precarity finds its way into Ntuli’s imagination of the post-apartheid city as a means of interrogating the truth of a crossover from apartheid. The poem also invites us to look at these issues through the interpenetrations that exist between psyche, body and world.

The first two stanzas read:

the sneezing sound
opening closing
and away their souls go

they get on
they travel to find what they can (1-5)

In these lines departures are spoken of in psychic terms as transporting of the passengers’ “souls” from their familiar township existence to a desired unfamiliar. This temporary disembodiment of the passengers does not actually deny corporeality, as will be seen, but only does this to indirectly show the intertwinement of body and mind as situated, problematically though, in a world. By representing the “soul” as going away, departing, the poet subtly shows a spiritual layer to the constant movements of these township passengers

² See www.southafrica.net/za/en/articles/entry/article-southafrica.net-kwa-mashu-performance-arts

gesturing a disconnection from place and a search beyond economic satisfaction. While the journeys are superficially economic, they are deeply rooted in the existential. The souls leave to seek not only food, but a deeper meaning for existence. They are not only passengers in the physical sense, therefore, but also in the psychic or spiritual sense.

The second stanza furthers the pilgrimage idea by the words “travel to find” (5), which point to ideas of a search or pursuit of something deeper. This means that home cannot contain their quest. Attachment to place has been complexified; without economic ‘attachment’, or with economic deprivation, it becomes rather difficult to hold on to place. The third stanza furthers the idea in this line: “they have solace to fill the corners of their chests” (6). The solace or comfort is in the journey, the fact of movement, the process of transit or their ‘passengerness’. The comfort comes from “knowing that they try” (8). A paradox also lies in the line “they leave to earn a living” (9), showing that living, that is fulfilment, does not reside in the place called home, but in an elusive somewhere away from home. In these words, the post-apartheid city becomes the space that has rendered certain inhabitants precarious, unhomey in fact, as they continue to remain strangers in the home-city that cannot provide them the luxury of the rest and stasis that ordinarily characterize home.

The fifth stanza shows the kind of alienations that the post-apartheid urban space embodies through the words “billboards block the sun / raisins in the shade” (12-13). The lines allude to a line in Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem” and the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansbury, both of which address failed dreams in a country where racism limits the African American. This intertextuality serves to deepen the issues which the poet has presented here in a minimalist way. It is an explanation for the ‘passengerness’ of the poor inhabitants of the post-apartheid city – their unsettlement and precarity. The image of billboards points to the capitalist and consumerist cultures that have come to characterize the new South Africa. A complexity lies in the way the cities have been transformed to accommodate new economic decisions that ensure South Africa retains her prominent space among leading African nations and the perhaps unexpected deepening of the alienation experienced by the poor in the society. Instead of speaking about apartheid’s direct racial divisions and exclusions, therefore, the poet constructs this new apartheid as primarily economic. The billboard becomes an image of alienation that separates the poor from the rich, those who benefit from the proceeds of mindless capitalism. It advertises the dream, the new South African dream, inspires desire for the touted good life, but constantly reminds the poor of their alienation from the mainstream economic life. The presence of such signs of capitalism continues to “block the sun” (12), to alienate the poor from hope in the post-apartheid dream of freedom. Edgar Pieterse captures this situation this way:

[B]arely two years after the moment of political liberation, South Africa embraced wholehearted integration into the neoliberal global economy by pre-empting trade reforms and lowering barriers and tariffs even before this was strictly necessary. The consequences have been devastating for the working classes and this has contributed to the rise of economic inequality and the spatial divisions that go along with that. (1)

The idea of alienation is further shown in the last stanza of the poem. Some members of the society who are either homeless or who die in the streets hoping for the city’s promise are presented as “bodies starved of the city’s pulse” (15). This is the ultimate rejection or marginalization. The city has a life, a rhythm, of its own from which the poor are excluded. They live in it, they inhabit it, but there is no genuine connection to its life, the capitalistic economy that enlivens or animates the city.

The poem begins with the word “souls” to refer to the inhabitants of this urban space

in existential terms and now turns to a directly corporeal dimension. The poet is concerned about the ways in which this precarious existence is both a psychic as well as a physical experience. He connects the human body with the urban world in which it is situated thus creating a vision in which the social, the psychic and the physical cross one another in both harmonious and conflictual ways as economic and social marginalization spells psychic and existential alienations. The corporeal is used in connection to the physical exteriority to convey the nature of the alienation between the post-apartheid subject and the post-apartheid urban space. The reference to “their chests” (6), for instance, points not only to physical presence and proximity of the human body to the world, but also the psychic severance that exists in the political and economic rifts.

3.0 “Martyrs”: Post-Apartheid Disillusionment

The exploration of the physical in relation to the post-apartheid urban space continues in the poem “Martyrs” with the city as a site of post-apartheid disillusionment. The poem functions as a measuring of time in a way that the present or the now becomes a complex mix of multi-temporalities. Although quite much has changed in the lives and spaces of South Africa, this poem shows that many South Africans who had lived in the apartheid period do not experience the reality of the shift to a post-apartheid era. The first three stanzas take a look at the days of apartheid in order to return to the present. They read as follows:

kings and shebeen queens
castle beers and blockade by the laagers

ritual sacrifice to landlords
pour out libations at the first of the month

assault that never was
sticks and stones will never hurt
but words will break those fragile bones (1-7)

The poet represents these “martyrs” of apartheid as “kings and shebeen queens” (1). The shebeen culture in the history of the South African urban space has come to be associated with racial domination and resistance. The image of the ‘legal’ Castle Beer invokes the 1927 Liquor Act’s prohibition of non-white South Africans from accessing licenced bars or engaging in the alcohol business. This legislation could not, however, stop the black people, particularly women, from running shebeens illegally in their homes in order to make a living. The shebeens also provided closed spaces for political discussions. The phrase “blockade by the laagers” (2) points to the kind of violence that was applied by the white government in trying to prevent shebeens from running. The women who ran these businesses and the men who patronized them as spaces for socializing and discussing political matters are the martyrs, according to this poem. This is evidenced by the resilience of the shebeens, their survival of apartheid.

The second stanza shows the dangerous existence that was the life of township dwellers in the days of apartheid. The landlord figure is prominent in connection to the township and points to the kind of unfavourable living conditions that the black population was forced to live in. The landlord-tenant relationship also speaks of a larger picture of the relationship between the poor and those in power. These people lived in their country but were yet to feel the full impact of citizenship as they remained mere tenants on their land. This speaks to their ‘passenger’ existence earlier pointed out. The third stanza, however, shows that despite the dangerous nature of township life, the assault that the people suffered only serves to reveal their resilience and resistance. The point of the poem is to explore what

Pieterse calls the “stubborn persistence of the apartheid city” (2). The remaining part of the poem brings us forward to the now:

sonnets over post-94 pianos
waxing lyrical on zebra crossing coloured rainbow

we buried her ngegama likajesu and translated bible verse
closed eyes
hands clasping
praying for a better life
ugogo wami prayed hard on her deathbed
harder than her fragile bones could hold (8-15)

The fourth stanza brings us to the present day South Africa with its contradictions. “Sonnets over the post-94 pianos” (8) point to the words crafted about, lip-service paid to, national unity, freedom, equality, prosperity, and everything that signifies the fall of apartheid. The lines only point to a lot of post-apartheid ideals as merely a performance through the use of artistic words: “sonnets”, “pianos” and “lyrical”. The road image in line nine refers to the idea of the post-apartheid present in terms of crossing over to a new side. However, the monochrome of the pianos and zebra crossing points to the tensions, contradictions and the fragmentations that still exist in the South African society based on race and class. Sonnets and lyricism may only be fantastic and dreamy, covering over the ugly persisting realities of the apartheid geography. This stanza shows that there is a deliberate attempt to be silent about race in the South African society or to preach colour-blindness. The mentions of piano, zebra crossing and rainbows, however, point to the persistence of racial tensions in the post-apartheid society, which may not necessarily be individual but institutional.

The disillusionment that is the core of the poem is finally fully revealed in the last stanza which speaks of the death of an old woman or the speaker’s grandmother who lived and hoped for the fruit of a free South Africa, but died without ever seeing the realities of the new South Africa. This woman could be one of the shebeen queens in the first stanza, the women who by their choice to run illegal liquor businesses resisted the imposing white power that sought to suppress them.

3.0 “Monday”: Despair and the City

In this poem the individual post-apartheid urban-dweller is rendered as an embodiment of loneliness and despair, in a lonely struggle to meet up with the demands of a capitalist post-apartheid society in which class difference is the new apartheid. In the first stanza, the speaker stands before a mirror in self-gaze, feeling a split between himself and the image in the mirror and watching ordinary existence lose meaning as “sadistic sun [gives way] to sinister moon” (1) and familiarity falls into “non-recognition” (3). In the second stanza, the speaker points to a certain fear associated with commodification; instead of full human satisfaction in life, the human subject has been turned into a competing chaser of material satisfaction.

The kind of complex intersections of socio-economic change and the persistence of apartheid within the post-apartheid society pointed out by Nuttall is invoked in the third stanza. The poet says “the phrase ‘things change’ / speaks only to those who expect to get returns” (7-8). The gospel of a new South Africa, the social and economic transformations anticipated to accompany the fall of apartheid, has actually been realized but in a way that benefits only a section of the country’s population. The phrase “those who get returns” (8) refers to the class of South Africans, regardless of race, who benefit from the new structure of

things. Nuttall has noticed, for instance, that for the first time the black middle class has outpopulated the white middle class (731). The paradox, however, remains in the fact that the majority of major businesses and farms remain white-owned and the condition of many black citizens has not really changed from what it was in the days of apartheid. The speaker in the poem belongs to the class that must “work work work” (11) without really earning enough to feel the change of the new South Africa. The labour of the poor city-dweller, “the work of lungs” (12), amounts to nothing but death, what the poet calls selling the soul (13).

From the fifth stanza, focus shifts inward with the speaker returning to memory and nostalgia in order to make sense of life; his “smile” is short-lived, defeated by the dominance of a recurrent “frown”. This inward focus results to self-destruction as an ultimate expression of the speaker’s despair, which is described as the “fiend in your circle / following you around” (21-22). The last three stanzas speak of this rather violent and defeated end: “forever remains unproven” (26), “spoon through your chest / bringing out blood and beauty” (30-31), “drumline / head throbbing / beat swallowing / you” (34-37). It is instructive to note the corporeal references from the beginning. The use of the body as a motif in the poem shows the speaker’s despair, suffering and final destruction. In reference to the despair, the speaker says “to *stare* at a mirror to *feel* hungry” (1, emphasis mine) using sensory terms that refer to the body as situated in a world, one of inequalities. In describing the unsatisfying drudgery that has become a part of his life as one untouched by the transformations around him, he writes that “the work of *lungs* counts for nothing” (12, emphasis mine) showing the body’s involvement in the search for meaning and fulfilment. The lines “spoon through your *chest*” (30, emphasis mine) and “*eyes* scream” (33, emphasis mine), “*head* throbbing” (35, emphasis mine) speak of the tragic close, the destiny of many alienated individuals in the post-apartheid city.

4.0 Conclusion

Through these poems, Ntuli invites us to re-evaluate the post-apartheid city and perhaps view it as the measure of the new South Africa. To him, even though the years have passed and the government has introduced different policies and developments that are advertised using politically correct language, the reality of poverty and exclusion remains a South African reality to most township dwellers. Apartheid’s fragmentations of the country’s geography remain to a large extent. This geography of difference is, however, more entrenched now in the economic structure that deepens the divide between the poor and the rich, and in the psyche of the post-apartheid poor. Ntuli also carefully avoids foregrounding race as the problem, but allows it to be present in subtle and unspoken ways. For him, apparently looking at the fact that the government is black, the new apartheid, although still deeply entwined with race, is primarily class-based.

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