

Ideas Under Arrest: Censorship in South Africa*

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Working Definition

Any curtailment or total denial of an individual's freedom to utter his or her ideas either orally or in writing, for any audience, whether actual or potential, may be defined as censorship. Bruce Lannes Smith, a political scientist, in describing what he labels "Authoritarian Control of Propaganda," highlights another facet of censorship. "In a highly authoritarian polity," he says, "the regime tries to monopolize for itself all opportunities to engage in propaganda, and often it will stop at nothing to crush any kind of counterpropaganda."¹ Since it would be inconceivable that any human being would willingly submit to the surveillance of his thinking and his utterances, regimes that seek to exercise this kind of control depend on a formidable armory of restrictive legislation by which they proceed to declare all ideas that challenge or expose their dogma illegal. "How long and how completely such a policy can be implemented," says Smith, "depends, among other things, on the amount of force that the regime can muster, (and) on the thoroughness of its police work."² As part of the "other things" mentioned by Smith, we might add that the success of such a policy also depends on a judiciary that is willing to compromise its integrity by sitting in judgment over cases involving laws whose morality is questionable, to say the very least. The independence of the courts is thus undermined, as the regime appoints judges who are sympathetic to its dogma.

Censorship can thus be further defined as a monopoly of propaganda enjoyed by a regime and upheld by force.

Since ideas are sharpened, in their focus, by a well-balanced education, an authoritarian regime seeking to control thought

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and word will, given time, control education as well, in an attempt to ensure that its products are conditioned to an unquestioning acceptance of the regime's policies. A recent and very pertinent example of this process is the present education for blacks in South Africa under the Bantu Education Act of 1953, first implemented in 1954. The government of South Africa declared unequivocally and proudly that an educational system that trained blacks so that they expected equality with whites was wrong because it was based on a wrong premise. The then Minister of Native Affairs, Dr. H. F. Verwoerd, harping on a theme he had articulated numerous times in this regard, said:

There is no place for him [the African] in the European community above the level of a certain forms of labor. . . . Until now he has been subjected to a school system which . . . misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze.

This government propaganda, in this case, aims at catching the children while they are young in order to produce generations of retarded blacks.

The importance of educational freedom cannot be overemphasized. How long and how thoroughly policies in which the government has a monopoly of propaganda persist depends partly on the quality, type, and distribution of higher education, since education leads to skepticism and the questioning of that which sounds dogmatic or lacking in sound evidence; "and if such education is of a type that emphasizes humane and universalistic values," says Smith, "an ignorant or unreasonable authoritarian regime is not likely to please the educated for very long."³ The history of harassment of the African teacher, and subsequently of the student, following the implementation of Bantu education in South Africa is excellent testimony to this assertion.

Human Rights at stake

It must by now be clear that you cannot talk about the denial of the right of freedom of speech and a wholesome education, without automatically plunging into the broader issue of freedom generally, that is, of human rights.

Therefore, while, in a discussion of censorship, one is inclined to look only at legislation specifically intended to compromise the freedom of the artist as an artist, it does not take long before one realizes that the distinction between *artist as artist* and *artist as person* is untenable. Speaking on “Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa,” T. T. Moyana, a black South African, says, “One should never look at the formidable list of censorship provisions in South African laws as the only impediments the government imposes on the creative writer. All repressive legislation in South Africa impedes the work of the artist.”⁴ No wonder, since censorship of the artist is, after all, a denial of one of his or her rights as a human being, namely the right to freedom of speech. Sometimes the same law achieves in one stroke both the restriction of personal freedom and the freedom to write. The five-year ban imposed on Mrs. Fatima Meer, a South African Indian sociologist, in 1976, is a case in point. Mrs. Meer was banned under the Internal Security Act, which makes it a serious crime to publish or in any way disseminate any utterances, whether orally or in writing, of a person so restricted. When this happened, it plunged the Ravan Press, a progressive publishing house situated in Johannesburg and Cape Town, into an unexpected crisis. Peter Randall, director of Ravan Press, stated that:

Ravan Press had immediately to withdraw three of its publications from circulation (Church and Nationalism in South Africa, South Africa’s Minorities and . . . Black Renaissance) since they all contain chapters by Mrs. Meer. The only way they can now be sold in South Africa is by having these chapters physically torn or cut out.⁵

The attack on Mrs. Meer meant that she was not only forbidden to write, but also to address gatherings. In addition, she could not be quoted, which meant that, even if her lectures had been exempted from the definition of “gathering” in terms of the act, she could still not use her own writings in her teaching because she would then be quoting herself and at the same time placing her students in danger of having to quote her. In fact, however, her lectures were not even exempted from the ban, and her career as a lecturer was therefore, in effect, being stopped.⁶

Censorship Laws

The principal censorship law in South Africa is the Publications Act of 1974 which superseded the Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963. The 1974 law is aimed at all non-newspaper publications including films, records, stage shows, art work, and even amateur photography. One of the most stringent provisions of this law, carried over from the 1963 act, is the power to ban not only current, but all future issues of periodicals that might be deemed “undesirable.” In addition, however, the 1974 act abolished the right of appeal to the courts by the banned writer or publisher. The key word in this act is “undesirable,” a dragnet term defined:

as applying to anything that offends or might offend public morals or religious feelings, anything that “brings any section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule or contempt,” anything that “is harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants of the Republic,” and anything that “is prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order.”⁷

Another of the worst features of the 1974 act is the so-called isolated passage criterion, also carried over from its predecessor. This provision means that a publication can be deemed “undesirable” by reason of a part of it being “undesirable.” Thus the argument that if taken in the context of the work as a whole, the supposed “obscenity” would disappear, is not applicable as a defense. It was this provision that prompted then Chief Justice Rumpff of the Appeals Court to declare with all solemnity that if the genitalia on the statue of David in Florence were separated from the rest of the statue and exhibited in isolation, they “might well be offensive to some old lady, but that is no reason for banning the statue as a whole.”⁸

Looking at these provisions, one is struck by the irony that the chief culprit in perpetrating the crimes listed is the South African government itself! Declare apartheid “undesirable,” and see how the offended morals and outraged religious feelings of the world are restored to peace. Declare apartheid “undesirable,” and see how the relations among the various sections of the inhabitants of the Republic of South Africa heal and mend. Declare

apartheid “undesirable,” and see how the security of the state, as well as peace and good order, are assured. All this, because it is the South African government that, through its policies, brings *all* “the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule and contempt.”

The law under which Mrs. Meer was banned was formerly known as the Suppression of Communism Act. This act, which for many years was South Africa’s major cover-all security legislation, defined “communism” so broadly that many non-communists and even anti-communists whose only crime was that they were opposed to apartheid, often found themselves hauled into court to defend themselves against charges of furthering the aims of communism. Under that act (and now under its successor, the Internal Security Act) people may be banned for their political beliefs and activities. Banned persons may not engage in journalistic activities nor may they be quoted. “Section 6 of the law gives the State President powers to suppress, without prior notice and without right of judicial appeal, any newspaper, magazine or periodical which in his opinion might further any of the aims of ‘communism’ as defined in the Act.”⁹

Another law inhibiting freedom of speech is specifically aimed at newspapers. The Newspaper and Imprint Registration Act of 1971 requires all newspapers to declare their “intended nature and contents” as well as the addresses and former connections of their editors and other personnel. A new newspaper seeking to register under this act may be required to pay a deposit of between R10,000 and R20,000 (approximately \$15,000-\$30,000) “if the Minister of Justice believes that Section 6 of the Suppression of Communism Act might at any future time be used against that newspaper.”¹⁰

The Public Safety Act, the Unlawful Organizations Act, the Terrorism Act, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act, the Riotous Assemblies Act, the Official Secrets Act, the General Law Amendment Act, the Defence Amendment Act, the Prisons Act, the Post Office Act, the Indecent or Obscene Photographic Matter Act, the Extension of University Education Act, the Bantu Administration Act—all these have provisions which interfere with the writer’s freedom to write or to be read.¹¹

The Power of Literature

Art, and particularly literature, derives its power from the fact that it is a vehicle of ideas, and ideas, untrammled and free-flowing, are the enemy of the oppressor. In its most socially relevant form, therefore, art is the mirror in which the oppressor sees himself truthfully reflected, that is to say, at his ugliest. In his panic the oppressor, by a strange distortion of logic, sees the ugliness in the art and not in himself, and instead of removing his own deformities, he breaks the mirror. Yet, literature is one of the most reliable mirrors that can ever be trained on society. A good novel or short story derives its persuasiveness from the fact that it confronts us with characters in situations. In other words, it creates what might just as well be real people in what might just as well be problems which we face, or have faced, or could face, in our daily lives. The character could just as well be our neighbor who lives on the other side of town. That is why an aesthetically superior literary work, provided it is also humanistic in the sense of being sympathetic to the condition of man, is the most effective vehicle for a moral lesson. We empathize with our neighbor, the character, even though we have not met him personally. We understand perfectly why Alex La Guma's *Willieboy*, the teenage coloured boy who is a murder suspect in *A Walk in the Night*, runs away from a murder he never committed. He is afraid of white power justice, especially since the murder victim is a white man. The white police constable Raalt, who stalks Willieboy over the rough rooftops of the District Six slum, has been itching to "lay my hands on one of those bushman bastards and wring his bloody neck." Now he has at last got his chance. While in real life you would have no way of knowing for sure whether Willieboy had or had not in fact committed the murder, in literature you have the advantage that the omniscient narrator takes you into his confidence and makes you privy to knowledge otherwise hidden from you. You have been following Raalt's raving mind, you know that his foul mood arises out of some serious domestic problem involving his wife and that he has been looking for a scapegoat to give vent to his pent-up rage, and his patrol of District Six gives him just such an opportunity. You know, too, that Willieboy just accidentally discovered Mr. Doughty's body, and that the real murderer is Michael Adonis, and that Willieboy pays the supreme penalty simply because he is a

coloured boy confronted with a white policeman who is unable to cope with his own personal problems. It could be you or your son or your brother or your cousin. Herein lies the power of literature as an instrument of persuasion.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, Nobel Prize-winning writer and a refugee from wartime Poland, once said that “If literature is an energy, it must be harnessed and used.” Singer was, quite clearly, addressing his words of wisdom to those authoritarian governments that would just as soon clap a pair of handcuffs on our neighbors, the characters, and put them behind bars. Perhaps it is precisely because literature is such an energy, such a liberating force, that it instills fear in the heart of the oppressor.

In 1974 Ravan Press, in Johannesburg, published a short nine-scene play entitled *Confused Mhlaba*, written by then 22-year-old Khayaletu Mqayisa, a Xhosa young man with a high school education. The play’s plot is summed up by Peter Randall as follows:

The story concerns a former political prisoner who returns after 25 years on Robben Island to his old township near Port Elizabeth and faces the problem of picking up the threads of his life again. He opts for steady employment, “working within the system” as it were, and explicitly rejects violence and subversion as a means of bringing about change in the social order.¹²

Confused Mhlaba was banned as soon as it was published, having been declared “undesirable” in terms of the Publications Act No. 42 of 1974. The grounds for this action were that the book “is harmful to the relations between sections of the inhabitants of the Republic” and “is prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare or the peace and good order.”¹³ The banning order was followed, a week later, by a ban on any performance of the play.

Since appeal to the courts had been abolished, the only recourse for the publishers was to apply to the Publications Appeal Board. The right to appeal is restricted to those with a financial interest in the banned publication. One of the provisions of the act is that the appellant may request the Director of Publications to state the reasons for the ban. Randall states that:

The Committee’s reasons were extremely cursory running to less than a foolscap typewritten page in Afrikaans. The Committee

seemed to attach some importance to the fact that “Mhlaba” can mean “land” or “country” in Xhosa (it can also mean “world”) and that the playwright might thus have meant to convey the impression that South Africa was a confused country. The Committee maintained that the play was “strongly emotionally loaded” and that it did not further good race relations, while it was also prejudicial to the general welfare and good order “because the police are presented in a bad light.”

In support of these contentions the Committee quoted a dozen short extracts from the play, taken completely out of context and with no consideration for any literary or dramatic function they might fulfill.¹⁴

The appellant, namely Ravan Press, alleged, generally, that the play was calculated to produce the very opposite of the effects the committee claimed it would produce, summing up their argument with the contention that “It is important for the maintenance of good relations that one section should be allowed to express its grievances, whether real or imagined, and any attempt to stifle this could only lead to resentment.”¹⁵ Regarding the police, Ravan Press argued that “it is unfortunately true that on occasions some members of the police have been insensitive in their dealings with certain sections and the incidents related in the publication cannot be said to be entirely fanciful.”¹⁶

The act empowers the chairman of the Publications Appeal Board to select two members to the board for any particular hearing. The chairman at this time was Justice J. Snyman, an Afrikaner. Peter Randall sums up the ridiculousness of this situation in a brief sentence, “In this case,” he says, “he chose to appoint two elderly Afrikaans-speaking whites like himself to sit in judgment on a play written in English by a young black man.” Ravan Press called four expert witnesses: a black professor of clinical psychology and an expert on race relations; an Afrikaans literary critic and academic; a young English writer and dramatist; and a professor in English at the University of South Africa who was also chairman of the English Academy’s drama award committee. (Incidentally, Mqayisa’s play had been considered a serious contender for an award by the academy.) All these witnesses unanimously declared the play to have considerable literary and dramatic merit. They also stressed that it was likely to produce consequences quite the opposite of those feared by the Directorate of Publications. There

was evidence that sometimes members of the appeal board failed to recognize and appreciate the humor of the play. In some cases, indeed, even individual words were misunderstood. It is possibly as a result of this that “One member of the board, an Afrikaans clergyman, wondered if the play could not be considered blasphemous because some of the characters took the Lord’s name in vain.”¹⁸

Needless to say, the appeal was lost even though in the process of upholding the ban, the appeal board substituted one section of the act for another with regard to the particular areas of “undesirability” of the book, i.e., the play was no longer found to be prejudicial to the safety of the state but to bring “a section of the inhabitants of the Republic into ridicule or contempt.”

Just how difficult it is to deal with such utter stupidity cannot be fully appreciated until you realize that you cannot counter the absurdities of these honorable members of the appeal board with laughter. You cannot poke fun at them by exposing the ridiculousness of their position. If you did so, you might be deemed to have contravened Subsection 37 (1) (a) of Act No. 42 of 1974, which states that it is an offense to “insult, disparage or belittle any member of the appeal board.” As these self-appointed guardians of our morals and our consciences parade their abysmal ignorance in public, you are forbidden to laugh, you are not to take their name in vain. Thus saith the law.

The irony of this situation is compounded by the fact that in arguing in favor of the abolition of appeal to the courts the vice-chairman of the Publications Board under the old act, who was described by Gerald Gordon as “a gentleman of 71 who had never left South Africa,” declared as follows: “We have people on the board who know a lot more about subjects such as art and literature than judges.”¹⁹

The Use of Intimidation

The experiences of Khayaletu Mqayisa lead us directly into our next area of concern, namely intimidation as a means of coercing the writer towards conformity, a concern which once again underscores the impossibility of separating the assault on the writer as a writer from his assault as a person. As a final footnote to his report on the banning of *Confused Mhlaba*, Randall states that:

While the appeal against the banning of his play was in progress, Mr. Mqayisa informed me that he had several times been subjected to harassment by the security police, with lengthy interrogation and searches of his home. He said that he was told that if he was found in possession of the play he would be arrested. As recently as June, he telephoned me from Port Elizabeth to report that he had been taken by two security policemen who threatened to throw him off a bridge because he was a "communist." His wife had received anonymous phone calls to say that her husband was having an affair with the wife of a well-known black political figure, who has himself been banned by the Minister of Justice.

Intimidation takes various forms; it can be a casual visit by members of the security branch who simply announce who they are, linger around for a few minutes, and then depart. If you, their intended target, are not at home, they leave a message that they were there. They might never come again. On the other hand you are never certain of that, and, as far as you are concerned, they just might drop in again any day, any time. This casual tactic, however, has tended to give way to more brutal forms of intimidation, such as that experienced by Khayaletu Mqayisa. And there is worse, much worse. For those who travel internationally, the confiscation of their passports is one of the most common means of hinting at the government's displeasure.

Perhaps the most common form of intimidation is detention without trial, usually accompanied by interrogation and violence or threats of violence as the case of Mqayisa clearly shows. Or one might take a superbrain such as Steve Biko, founder and first president of the South African Students Organization (SASO) and father of the Black People's Convention (BPC), a man difficult to describe simply and to categorize: a writer, philosopher, scholar, and leader; a man with clarity of thinking, the devastating effect of whose simple but unassailable logic left his detractors confused. He was detained several times. The last time, August 18, 1977, he was to pay with his life for his power to mobilize African thinking into a force seldom felt in South Africa's politics of liberation, through the movement known as Black Consciousness. They killed Biko. Bashed his skull in as if, in their senseless brutish anger, they had sought to symbolically destroy the very seat of his

intelligence. Among the Biko books that came in the wake of his death, one of the most eloquent in revealing the man is a selection of his writings entitled *I Write What I Like* edited, with a personal memoir, by Father Aelred Stubbs, C.R.²¹ Many, like Biko, paid this penalty for daring to utter the unutterable.

The Writer in Exile

Some writers chose exile to the stifling atmosphere at home. The late fifties, but especially the sixties, saw the greatest exodus of writers, particularly black writers, who sought to pursue their careers in less restricted circumstances. Bloke Nodisane, Lewis Nkosi, Alex La Guma, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, and Todd Matshikiza were among those who chose this course of action. Time has taken its toll on some of them: some, like Matshikiza, simply drank themselves literally to death; others, like Nakasa, took their lives in more spectacular ways: Nakasa is reported to have flung himself to death from a New York City apartment (but rumors lingered for some time that he had been assassinated by agents of the South African government); yet others, like Peter Abrahams, decided to forget their troubled motherland and make their homes permanently in exile (Peter Abrahams now lives in Jamaica).

Perhaps a rare case, insofar as writers are concerned, is that of Ezekiel Mphahlele. After much soul-searching, Mphahlele decided to go back to South Africa after twenty years in exile outside had become meaningless for him. Ironic? Of course. The life of a black South African is a veritable riddle of contradictions. Hard choices stare you in the face daily, and you plunge and pray that you are right. Mphahlele's feelings about South Africa when apartheid impinged more and more on his freedom as a writer, are conveyed by him in his essay "Censorship in South Africa" in his collection of essays entitled *Voices in the Whirlwind*. He says:

I felt stifled in my own writing after I had been dismissed from teaching. It seemed that the last leverage had been wrenched from my grip, although even as a teacher my activities had been circumscribed. . . . After five years, I decided to leave my country.²²

Later, being now “out of the nightmare,” he declares: “I have begun to realize all the more fully what the dread of censorship can do to the intellect.”²³ Twenty years later Mphahlele returned to South Africa because, as he says, “I always felt that something was pulling me back to Africa.”²⁴ Specifically, he felt, later, after his return to the United States following a spell in Zambia, that “it was simply to say that we would live there as long as a situation hadn’t been precipitated which would simply call us back, call us back this time to South Africa.”²⁵ Summarizing Mphahlele’s position regarding his return, Lelyveld, the writer of the report quoted above, says: “In fact it was not the situation in South Africa that changed as much as it was Mr. Mphahlele’s willingness to go on waiting.”²⁶

Sustaining oneself in exile is by no means easy. One can, I dare say, see some of the passion in a book title such as Dennis Brutus’s *Stubborn Hope*. Mphahlele’s own *The Wanderers* could have been taken as indicative of the emotional dislocation, the sense of rootlessness, of a writer in exile seeking to anchor himself down but never quite succeeding. And at this point the old ship sails home again.

As a prelude to his return, Mphahlele had visited South Africa in 1976 on an invitation to read a paper at the first meeting of the Institute of Black Studies in Johannesburg. Recalling this memorable visit after nineteen years in exile, Mphahlele interwove with his reminiscences of his childhood, which were triggered off by his pilgrimage to his ancestral home, a strong sense of his irrelevance in the American educational system in which he was currently involved. This was accompanied by an irresistible pull to go back and teach in a black college in South Africa. In his own words: “For the last five to eight years I have been chafing in this glass house called exile. Been feeling more and more irrelevant to American education.”²⁷ He weighs the possibility of teaching in a black college in the United States, but he rejects that idea, saying: “I cannot find self-fulfillment teaching in a fragmented culture, riddled through with inequalities that are hallowed and sanctioned by social practice, very often above the constitution. I lack a cultural context.”²⁸ The conclusion is inevitable:

I reckon if I can live another 25 years, barring imprisonment or detention, my 20 years of exile can pay off better in South

Africa, where I can teach within a culture I can grasp, one that is predominantly Black, and that stands clearly outside the political and economic feudalism in which the minority white culture has imprisoned itself. . . .

So when I meet the African faculty at the University of the North, and they tell me they want me, I realize I may well come full circle. Although the institution was conceived to promote complete separation, there are faculty and students determined to make it and others like it a school worthy of its name. It can and should rise above the tribal pettiness of the original architects who were projecting their own tribal exclusiveness into our image of ourselves as Black people. I must be part of this success.²⁹

Needless to say, Mphahlele did not become “part of this success,” not for anything as ennobling as “imprisonment or detention,” but simply a result of the South African government’s determination to hurt him the most by denying him the very thing which would have made his return meaningful. And this did not end with the University of the North. Mphahlele was subsequently offered a post in the English Department of the University of Transkei. He accepted, and there was much excitement at that university about his coming. Suddenly “the government of Transkei” reversed the decision of its own university to employ Mphahlele. No reasons were given. The question at once arises: Was it the government of Transkei which made this decision? If so, why? Or was it in fact the South African government intent on frustrating Mphahlele by making it impossible for him to “teach within a culture I can grasp, one that is predominantly Black”?

Again one has to express surprise, however, that in thinking these thoughts about returning to South Africa, Mphahlele seemed to have forgotten that the University of the North, as well as the other so-called black colleges, were neither Tuskegees nor Howards, that they were still very much under the control of those “petty tribal architects” he refers to, meaning the Boer government of South Africa and that it was this same government that had the last word as to who shall teach there. So when he returned to South Africa, it was precisely this involvement which he was denied, and there was nothing he or the black faculty of Turfloop could do about it. He now teaches at the University of Witwatersrand’s Centre for African Studies. This is perhaps the most cruel of all the ironies of the situation he found himself in. The

fact is that, all appearances notwithstanding, he was returning not on his own terms, but on those of the South African government.

There were other problems for Mphahlele: he was still a "listed" person whose books could therefore not be read. Suddenly one day in the first part of 1979, however, South African liberal newspapers screamed headlines announcing the news that most of Ezekiel Mphahlele's books had been removed from the banned list. Clearly, the government was getting all the political capital out of the situation--they had refused him the right to return, and now they were, to any casual observer, becoming the very model of magnanimity in unbanning his books. It is reasonable to surmise that this was intended, *inter alia*, to embarrass Mphahlele who found himself faced with an offer he could not refuse. Lelyveld, in his *New York Times* article, reports that it was under pressure from the University of the Witwatersrand that "the authorities 'unlisted' him, and now only some of his books are banned."³⁰

Time does not permit us here to speculate on the possible influence Mphahlele's latest novel, *Chirundu*, published shortly after his return, may have brought on the decisions made about him and his works. In this novel, Zambia carries the brunt of the fury of an African wanderer unable to find a place in the continent where he could feel at home. Zambia comes in for the most scurrilous attack and, vicariously through one of his peripheral but important characters, Pitso, a South African exile, Mphahlele states his clear preference for South Africa over any other part of the continent, least of all Zambia.

"The Silenced Generation"

From the point of view of the younger generations coming after the Mphahleles, the La Gumas, et al., the tragedy has been that they have been out off from the thinking of these veterans since their books, or at least some of them, are banned in South Africa. Jane Grant calls the exiled writers "the silenced generation." Jane Grant was a research student at Essex University in Colchester who went to South Africa in August and September 1976 to find out, among other things, what, and how much, of the writers in exile was remembered by the younger generation of blacks. She states: "I was concerned to find out what influence, if any, these

exiles had on the contemporary literary scene in South Africa; how much they were at least remembered, if not read.”³¹ She continues that “Perhaps the saddest thing was that the government seems to have patently succeeded in silencing a whole generation of its writers. . . .When I asked what influence writers like Nkosi, Mphahlele, La Guma . . . had on young South African Blacks today, I was repeatedly told ‘None at all.’”³²

This sense of deprivation is conveyed eloquently by one of its victims, Sipho Sepamla, who, decrying the fact that he had been brought up on Shakespeare, Dickens, Keats, etc., says of these exiled writers: “These men I would have liked tenfold because they have all sucked from the tits of my mother. But alas! For me this has been denied.”³³

Perhaps too much emphasis is being laid on this loss to the younger generation, however. Maybe it is precisely this situation that made the black children of South Africa develop a sense of self-reliance seldom paralleled in modern history. This self-reliance, this forced-paced maturation, is the very thing that turned them into men and women long before their time, and it is a good guess that it was accelerated by the absence of the voice of the older generation. This consideration brings us back to the question of ideas and their resilience. Black Consciousness, a leap in the political growth of the black person in South Africa, might not have happened as soon, or might have been channeled into different forms of expression, or might just not have happened at all, if there had not been such stimuli as Bantu education, censorship, and the exile of the writers. After all it was white liberalism that had been espoused by, and indeed even helped to mold, many of these older writers which the new philosophy of Black Consciousness taught the younger generation to eschew. It was this child turned adult who organized strikes and ordered his parents not to go to work. It was this same child who, in the Year of Soweto, organized a boycott of Christmas shopping that enriches the white merchants, because for the blacks it was a time of mourning, not of rejoicing. It is this same child who today, so to speak, “lisps in numbers” as he or she writes daring poetry of protest or becomes one of a not insignificant number of itinerant “township dramatists” theatrically portraying the conditions of contemporary lives, and educating the black public. It is this child who, in the teens, is condemned to Robben Island maximum security prison for

periods of five years and more for his or her beliefs, or who goes into exile. It is this child who is felled by the policeman's machine gun, dying in order that ideas may live on.

Ideas under Arrest

Ideas under arrest! Soon after Biko's brutal murder by the South African gestapo, an editorial in a liberal English-language South African newspaper predicted that Biko might become a greater threat to the South African regime after his death than while he was alive. It is, I suppose, in the nature of things that the oppressor is incapable of learning from history. Basically, the same methods are used by him today as were employed with little success by men of his ilk as far back as the pre-Christian era. Gerald Gordon states:

In 250 BC the first ruler of the Ts'in dynasty in China publicly burnt all books about the teachings of Confucius and threw hundreds of his disciples alive into the flames; in 35 BC Caligula banned Homer's *Odyssey* because its ideals of Greek freedom were dangerous to autocratic Rome. The futility of the crushing and the shackling is clear: the despots are forgotten, Homer and Confucius are immortal.

Gordon then concludes, "As long as men hold dear the values of freedom, so long shall the right freely illuminate society by the written word survive the restraints of the censor."³⁴ This strong affirmation is of universal validity, and those who are not cloyed by the disease of opulence and rendered incapable of thinking beyond protecting their oft ill-gotten wealth, those who are not corrupted by power, will always dream of a better tomorrow. They will go ahead and share their dreams and forge the means to make them come true. Their aim is no more and no less than the betterment of their society. They are not anarchists. Yet those holding power and wealth see them as a threat to that position and try to arrest the dreamers. But prison then loses its stigma and, instead, only succeeds in creating martyrs and popular heroes. Biko's persecution, the attempt to humiliate him by forcing him to remain manacled and naked for days on end only helped to augment his stature as a martyr and a hero.

Banning books is analogous to the imprisonment of persons. This time, however, it is ideas which are arrested and kept in solitary confinement in the hope that they will somehow wither and die before they contaminate the rest of society. Like jail, banning becomes a mark of authenticity on the part of the writer, a sign of confrontation with the power structure. Martyrdom, heroism, and honor for the banned become the medals for their meritorious service. Many even feel left out if they are not touched by it. One is reminded here of Bertolt Brecht's poem, as quoted by Nadine Gordimer, in which a writer makes precisely this sort of lament:

*When the Regime ordered that books with dangerous teachings
Should be publicity burnt and everywhere
Oxen were forced to draw carts of books
To the funeral pyre,
An exiled poet,
One of the best,
Discovered with fury when he studied the list
Of the burned books, that his books
Had been forgotten. He rushed to the writing table
On wings of anger and wrote a letter to those in power.
Burn me, he wrote with hurrying pen, burn me!
Do not treat me in this fashion. Don't leave me out.
Have I not
Always spoken the truth in my books? And now
You treat me like a Liar! I order you:
Burn me!*

Commenting on this poem, Gordimer says, "so far as South African writers are concerned, we can understand the desperate sentiments expressed while still putting up the fight to have our books read rather than burnt."³⁵

No, we would not like our books to be burnt, but we would like to know that they are worthy of being burnt! Censorship is a good, if sometimes erratic, barometer of this.

Conclusion

Censorship has continued to take its toll on black literature. The inevitable consequence, namely the persecution of the person whose writings are banned, also continues. Many of the younger writers have, like the earlier generation, gone into exile. Pitika Ntuli, poet, artist, and sculptor after many years in Swaziland, now

lives in London; poet Keorapetse Kgositsile lives in Tanzania and teaches at the University of Dar es Salaam; the novelist Bessie Head lives in Botswana; these and many others are living in exile in some part of the world. Many, however, continue to live and pursue their writing in South Africa. Khayaletu Mqayisa is a case in point.

One sees a new kind of daring in these younger writers, a confrontation of the regime comparable to that in pitched street battles with the police. One of the most patent manifestations of this daring is the choice of English as the language of their literature published and read in South Africa itself. English makes it possible to talk direct to the white man, the wielder of corrupt power. Generally, writing in English in black Africa has tended to coincide with a stage in the liberation struggle where the oppressor is seen to be clearly on the retreat. This, in turn, coincides with a new mood of defiance on the part of the oppressed.

English also facilitates communication among the various language groups, so that a poem or a short story which might have had limited circulation if written in an African language, circulates much more widely in English.

The fact also that publishers like the Ravan Press have come into existence and are willing to take the risk of publishing literature that is officially out of grace and to use all means possible to challenge and expose the government's authoritarianism, is significant. Ravan Press also produces a literary, largely poetry, magazine called *Staffrider* which publishes poetry, mostly in English, by young blacks, many of whom live in Soweto. This publication makes it possible to maintain a steady stream of protest poetry aimed at the Establishment. *Staffrider* has also suffered its own share of banning, including its very first issue.

Ideas are in the habit of defying prison walls and, as we saw earlier, in the course of time the tyrant is forgotten, but the ideas for which men and women are persecuted, live on. Long after the censor, the jailer, and the executioner have gone into oblivion, men and women of ideas will be honored as heroes and martyrs by the generations that are coming.

Notes

- ¹ Bruce Lannes Smith, "Propaganda," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1978), vol. 15, p. 44.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ T. T. Moyana, "Problems of a Creative Writer in South Africa," in *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 87.
- ⁵ Peter Randall, "The Banning of 'Confused Mhlaba,'" *Index on Censorship* 5, 4 (Winter 1976):4.
- ⁶ "Index Index," *Index on Censorship* 5, 4 (Winter 1976): 84.
- ⁷ "South Africa's Censorship Laws," *Index on Censorship* 4, 2 (Summer 1975):38.
- ⁸ Gerald Gordon, "The Right to Write," *Contrast* 9, 3 (December 1974): 43.
- ⁹ "South Africa's Censorship Laws," p. 38.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid., pp. 38-40.
- ¹² Randall, "The Banning of 'Confused Mhlaba,'" p. 3.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Gerald Gordon, "The Right to Write," *Index on Censorship* 4, 2 (Summer 1975): 42.
- ²⁰ Randall, "The Banning of 'Confused Mhlaba,'" p. 5.
- ²¹ Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).
- ²² Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972; first published 1967), p. 212.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 213.
- ²⁴ Joseph Lelyveld, "Black South African Goes Home Again," *New York Times*, 16 November 1980, p. 3.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ezekiel Mphahlele, "A South African Exile's Return: Back to Ancestral Ground," *First World* 1, 3 (May/June 1977): 15.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p.16.
- ³⁰ Lelyveld, "Black South African Goes Home Again."
- ³¹ Jane Grant, "Silenced Generation," *Index on Censorship* 6, 3 (May/June 1977): 38.

³² Ibid.

³³ Siphso Sepamla, "The Black Writer in South Africa Today: Problems and Dilemmas," *New Classic* 3 (1976):19.

³⁴ Gerald Gordon, "The Right to Write," *Contrast* 9, 3 (December 1974): 15.

³⁵ Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer's Freedom," *Index on Censorship* 5, 2 (Summer 1976): 53.