

GCINA MHLOPHE'S *HAVE YOU SEEN ZANDILE?*  
THE BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN TRADITION AS  
A POLITICAL STATEMENT

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In most of the works written by African women private growth is a prerequisite for social change. Art and personal growth seem to be intertwined. This paper tries to demonstrate that, although Gcina Mhlophe insists on her plays not being about politics, through the presentation of her personal experience and the legacy of her traditional background, she actually makes a political statement. Elements of the Black South African tradition—such as dance, storytelling and song—are integrated to shape her play *Have You Seen Zandile?* Thus, Mhlophe asserts the existence of Black South African culture, at a time where apartheid was trying to erase any trace of any culture other than the one existing in the Western world. Moreover, Mhlophe makes a political statement by underlining a woman's world and experience (there are only women from different generations in her play) and by examining her own tradition and rebelling against the oppression and abuse women receive from men within it. Consequently, the playwright is not only revealing the existence of a Black South African culture but also raising women's issues in order to encourage other women to elevate their voice and fight against any sexist and/or racist rule that might hinder their personal growth.

Living in [South Africa] has made massive cultural and historical demands on [women], so that the mere act of writing, of finding the time, let alone space to do so, is in itself an act of monumental significance.

(Seriti sa Sechaba Publishers 8)

Cry out for joy  
For your seed has multiplied  
Shout out with great joy  
Four you have grown strong  
Woman  
You will bring everything to pass.

(Ndlaleni Radebe 9)

Lloyd W. Brown, who recognizes the male-oriented field in African literature and the absence left in it by the unheard voices of African women, observes that in most of the works by African women writers private growth is a prerequisite for social change: "All the major [African women] writers are preoccupied with the woman's personal strength—or lack of it—when they analyze sexual roles and sexual inequality" (180-181). Brown establishes that African women writers see the need of self-introspection as a fundamental step to participate in the African struggle for liberation. He notices art and personal growth are intertwined, and now "the African woman writer has become her own best symbol of female achievement and growth" (184). Gcina Mhlophe insists her plays are not about politics, but about feelings. Her plays, which reflect her personal experiences, become universal to other women who watch her work.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie believes "the African female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three." She further argues the African woman writer needs to be politically conscious (10). Ogundipe-Leslie formulates the need to break with the stereotypes about African women and reveal them in their full complexity. This complexity of characters is reflected in the African tradition in which women played a very important role within their societies.

Seriti sa Sechaba Publishers, referring concretely to South African women and culture, state: "Our culture and our folklore were handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth around the evening fires, in the fields as they worked, in the veld as they herded the cattle. And in all this it was the women, the mothers and the grandmothers who did the

communicating, the teaching" (6). Mhlophe's work is a good example to be examined for she has integrated traditional African elements to shape their plays: songs, dance and storytelling. And, tradition, according to Adetokunbo Pearce, "is the root of a people's culture, but it becomes retrogressive if treated as an end in itself" (78). Black South African women writers, as proposed by the Black Consciousness Movement, must examine and use their African tradition in order to understand their present and profile their destiny.

Although *Have You Seen Zandile?* was originally conceived by Gcina Mhlophe, based on her childhood, it was devised by the playwright in collaboration with Maralin Vanrenen and Thembi Mtshali. Mhlophe asserts she had never told the story of her childhood to anybody before. She recognizes the great influence her grandmother and her mother have exerted on her, for they were very strong characters. It is dedicated to Mhlophe's grandmother's memory, "who deserves praise for the storyteller in [her]" (1).<sup>1</sup> The play opened in 1985 and ran for three years. It toured through England, Scotland, Germany and the United States (in Chicago), where she obtained the Jefferson Award (Interview).

Mhlophe writes poetry, stories, plays and is an actress. She is a storyteller, and can sing and dance as well. And, apart from English, Mhlophe speaks Zulu and Xhosa—her father is Zulu and her mother, Xhosa. She has been involved in theater since 1982. Mhlophe starred in *Born in the R.S.A.*, by Barney Simon; participated in another play by Maishe Maponya which attempted to teach people about trade unions; and have worked in different workshops with students and professional actors. The playwright believes the workshop is a very creative venue to develop artistic inclinations. She admires the discipline people show in the United States and acknowledges the works by African American writers such as Maya Angelou, Wendolyn Brooks and Ntozake Shange. Mhlophe claims to be a strange character in her community, for nobody has been able to put her down. She believes that by writing about her own experience she can encourage other women (Interview).

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent references to this play will be indicated by (*Zandile* page number).

Mhlophe is one of the writers who claims in her plays she does not deal with "the big politics of the world and the country," the way Matsemela Manaka or Maishe Maponya do. She insists her writing deals with the person, and the audience might interpret that personal experience "into something bigger and relate it to the rest of the world" (Interview). She recognizes, however, that in her plays there is always hope—which is also a political standpoint, but always dealing with ordinary people, their lives, their falling in love with each other, instead of using very rhetorical poetry or being strictly political. Mhlophe underlines her concern about people's feelings which she wants to portray in her characters.

Like the South African playwright Fatima Dike, she presents on stage a woman's experience from a woman's perspective, which offers a wider and more complete picture of the Black South African culture. *Have You Seen Zandile?*, in contrast to Manaka's *Egoli* and Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon's *Woza Albert!*, performed by only two male actors, is performed by two women who enact a varied number of characters. Mhlophe's choice of this women's world is extremely significant because it presents a personal experience which expressly relates to women's reality and the audience's response speaks for it. Mhlophe recalls how women of all ages, teenagers and older women, would wait after the performance to talk to her (she herself impersonated Zandile). These women identified themselves with the experience they saw in the play, for "it was universal and not a straight-forward political play" (Interview).

Mhlophe's insistence in her not writing about straight-forward political issues, confirms what the African American critic Margaret Wilkerson, and other women writers and feminists have asserted about the existence of a woman's aesthetic, about a woman's different language and expression, and about the personal becoming political—even when women are not aware of their political statements implied in their personal experiences. An example is Mhlophe's story "Nokulunga's Wedding." In this story, she refers to an African woman whose marriage is arranged without her consent, describing how this woman is kidnapped, harassed and raped. Mhlophe depicts a woman's rebellious attitude against such a treatment, even if by the end she remains with her husband. Mhlophe parallels African women's situation with that of slaves either in South Africa or North America, where they did continually rebelled against their condition.

African women also rebel against the oppression and abuse received from men. This story is clearly a political statement about women's experience under a sexist, and oppressive reality in which a woman can be treated simply like cattle.

*Have You Seen Zandile?* narrates Zandile's story from her childhood to adulthood in fourteen scenes. The performance is presented on a bare stage using only a big box and two or three props which transform into different objects depending on the scene and the place where the action evolves. The emphasis of the action lies on the two actresses' acting skills to enact different women characters of various ages which they exert through gesture, movement and simple costumes. Like in *Woza Albert!* the actresses address invisible characters, or invisible objects. For instance, in the first scene Zandile is heard "off-stage saying goodbye to her school friends" and continues talking to them while she enters the stage. Then she begins to sing and plays "hop-scotch game with stones. . . . [And, suddenly, she hears] a little girl laughing at her. She turns and focusses her attention where the imaginary child is seated" (Zandile 1-2). In Zandile's conversation to her imaginary friends or when she sings, or talks to her grandmother she speaks Zulu and English.

Regarding Black South African acting, David Coplan underlines the qualities he has observed in actors, who show

the vigorous, broadly gestural and rhetorically commanding style of presentation handed down from traditional oral and choreographic narration. . . . Emotional and dramatic conflict are more often expressed through vocal quality and physical movement than in dialogue or psychologically intense posing or naturalistic action. (214)

Black South African actors have closely followed Grotowski's acting principles. Matsemela Manaka quotes Brecht and Grotowski to affirm that there can be theater without written text, but not without the actor. He adds that "bad writing does make bad theatre but it stands the chance of being made better because of good acting" (16A). As a result, if Western theater places a strong emphasis on dialogue to explain the action, in Black South

African theater it is action itself which explains the meaning. The character must symbolize.

Through parallel monologues, we are introduced to Zandile and Gogo's love for each other. If Zandile, before arriving at her grandmother's home, is imagining the sweets which her grandmother will give to her, Gogo is equally thinking of her grand-daughter before she arrives home, showing her care and affection when she notices Zandile's little doll on the floor. Gogo wonders if Zandile is really happy living with her and explains the audience why she has decided to keep her. When Zandile was a baby, Gogo was worried that Zandile's parents would not have financial sources to send her to school:

GOGO. ... Tom [Gogo's son] thinks education is not important for a girl. Ha! Even if I have to die doing it, I'm keeping Zandile at school. (*Zandile* 9)

Education is an important issue. The first scene shows Zandile going home after school. Gogo also emphasizes the importance of education, dismissing the myth about "education [not being] important for a girl."

Gogo not only wants to keep Zandile at school for her to receive education. Gogo herself is a teacher for Zandile, for she gives the child "the great gift of stories and the magic to tell them," as well as the child "gives the grandmother a purpose" (*Zandile* 11). The relationship existing between child and grandmother is one of great respect and love for each other, being happy together away from the outer world, as stated by Zandile:

ZANDILE. Oh, Gogo, I'm going to stay with you forever because you always have surprises. (*Zandile* 15)

It is through Zandile's eyes that we learn how teachers give African children white names at school. Zandile improvises a class and teaches a lesson to her grandmother's flowers acting like her teacher:

ZANDILE. [She addresses the flowers] ... The inspector is coming here today. You know the inspector does not understand our language (*she starts giggling*) and we don't want to embarrass him. (*Puts her hand over her mouth and laughs*) He cannot say our real names so we must all use white names in class today. (*Zandile* 20)

Like Dike, Mhlophe comments on the outside world but from within Zandile's community, asserting the existence of an African culture, values and tradition. Furthermore, there is a reversal in Zandile's laughing at a White person who cannot pronounce an African name, whereas in Western culture it is presented the other way around; i.e., Whites laughing and making jokes about African names as if only Western names were the norm.

The audience plays an important role in Mhlophe's play. Mazisi Kunene remarks the important role the audience plays in the performance of African theater. The audience represents the critics, being the spectator who actually controls the performance (Conversation). The audience's participation is requested during the performance of this play. Zandile disappears and her grandmother is looking for her. With Zandile's picture in her hand, Gogo addresses members of the audience:

GOGO. Have you seen this child? ...Her name is Zandile. ... She is eight years old, she disappeared on the 14th December 1966.... Have you seen Zandile? (*Zandile* 34)

This scene reminds the Mayo Mothers of Chile looking for their missing children and relatives.

Mhlophe raises the issue of women many times separated, and at times abandoned by men. Zandile does not follow tradition without questioning it, like her mother did. She wants to have a say and not to be given away to a man she does not love. We observe how Zandile is growing up as a new woman, who appreciates and values a rich tradition of story-telling and culture, but who also rejects other issues which might imply women's

oppression. Zandile misses her father—who is not living with her mother—and keeps asking her why her father is not with them:

ZANDILE. Ma, I miss my father. You never talk about him.  
(Zandile 53)

Zandile's mother—Lulama—tells her how due to her pregnancy she was not accepted in a jazz band where she used to sing with her father. Mhlophe, once more, raises the issues not only of pregnant women who have to raise their children alone—as Dike, and the African American playwrights Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange do in their plays. She also shows the need for education and family planning. Mhlophe exposes how pregnant women are rejected under patriarchal patterns. When women get pregnant they usually lose their jobs—like Thembi in Dike's *The First South African*, who is fired from her teaching position.

Women's issues are raised as part of any woman's experience. Similarly, the way girls find out about their first menstruation is presented in a scene which takes place in a river between Zandile and her friend Lindiwe. Throughout this scene we learn that sometimes there are snakes in the river that bite girls and they bleed. They also believe that blood comes out of girls when they sleep with boys and they refer to a girl who had blood in her dress at school. Mhlophe presents the lack of sexual education girls suffer from in their respective communities. These girls go through puberty with fears, without having been prepared to take their step into womanhood.

Zandile, however, has received a great legacy from her grandmother: her story-telling. This legacy is now part of Zandile's reality, as presented in the praise poem she recites for Mr. Hlatshwayo, who is going on pension: "*Zandile completes the first part of Mr Hlatshwayo's family praise name, which every African family has. These names outline each family's history. She then starts a song*" (Zandile 63). While she follows the whole ceremony, the audience sees Zandile's grandmother who watches Zandile's performance and leaves before she can notice her presence.

The play ends with Zandile (now eighteen years old) who has found out the address where she can contact her grandmother after years of separation. When Zandile arrives at the given address, she is informed by a neighbor that Gogo has just died and left a suitcase to be given to her. Zandile opens the suitcase, and she "*takes out all the little parcels her grandmother has been putting away for her through all the years*" (Zandile 77). Thus, the play ends with Zandile, now a woman, in the same place where she spent her childhood with her grandmother—the way we saw her at the beginning of the play. The circular structure of the play presents a ritualistic quality observed not only in the return to the same place, but also in the cycle of life and death, for now the grandmother is dead and Zandile will continue to carry the torch that Gogo lit in her heart.

Gogo's teaching is a flame burning in Zandile's spirit which will never abandon her. It is the memory and legacy of women like Gogo that Mhlophe attempts to bring out of the darkness, for other women to follow and be encouraged by their example. Gogo symbolizes all those women whose names will not be included in the history books, but who are Africa's heart which continues to beat in women's lives and leads them in their everyday courageous struggle of survival.

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