

Maxine Case

1989 to 2009: STANDING ON THEIR SHOULDERS

In 1978, the South African writer Miriam Tlali was a participant in the IWP. During her visit, Tlali read her short story “Just the Two of Us”, which deals with sexual relations and the balance of power between a white male train conductor and a young black woman traveler. According to the Ghanaian writer and academic Ama Ata Aidoo, this was the only time that the story was read (although she credits the reading as taking place in Ohio). The story was promptly banned in South Africa.¹

Tlali was no stranger to adversity. Born in Johannesburg in 1933, she attended the University of Witwaterstrand for two years until it was closed to black people. She later attended the University of Lesotho, but was unable to complete her studies due to financial difficulties.

Tlali completed her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1969, but it was only published in 1975 – and banned in 1979. Her novel *Amandla*, based on the 1976 Soweto uprising, was published in 1980, but banned a few weeks later.

Then, of course, there was Bessie Head, a visitor to the IWP from September to December 1977. Born to a white mother and an unknown black father, Head was adopted by a white family, who returned her on realizing that she was not white. She was then fostered by a colored family until the age of 13, after which she attended a missionary school.

Head worked first as a teacher and then later as a reporter for a variety of publications. She also became involved in politics, becoming a member of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC). Head was arrested for her PAC activities in 1960 and provided the police with information, a fact which tormented and shamed her.

Early in 1964, Head became determined to leave South Africa, believing that she would find inspiration to write in a “free African country”. She applied for and received a teaching post in the protectorate of Bechuanaland, but the South African government refused to grant her a passport.

In March 1964, Head left South Africa for Bechuanaland (it became known as Botswana upon its independence in 1966) on a one-way exit permit, which meant that she could not return to the country of her birth. Head was to remain without citizenship until 1979 when the Botswana government granted her citizenship without her asking for it. (Her own application in 1977 was turned down.) After achieving international acclaim for her writing after a lifetime of poverty, Head died from hepatitis at the age of 49 in 1986.

¹ Interestingly, Tlali circumvented this problem by changing the title to “Devil at a Dead End”, which was published in her collection *Footprints in the Quag* (1989), which was published in the USA in the same year with the title *Soweto Stories*.

I've used Head and Tlali as two examples to typify the problems faced by writers during apartheid. In talking to students and visitors from other countries, I realized how difficult it is to comprehend the depth of the separate lives that South Africans lived; which was the grand design of apartheid.

How do I explain, in one short paper, a system that permeated all aspects of life in South Africa? How do we explain its longevity? Perhaps fiction provides the easiest answers: allowing a glimpse into the impact of apartheid on the individual level.

But here are the cold facts.

Apartheid refers to a system of legal racial segregation and was introduced by the National Party government following the general election of 1948. It would be in effect from 1948 to 1994.

A distinction can be made between "grand" apartheid and "petty" apartheid.

Grand apartheid aimed to separate the country into white South Africa and African "homelands", thus depriving African people of citizenship rights in "white" South Africa. Black people had to carry passes (identification papers for African men and women), which effectively restricted their movement.

Petty apartheid describes the laws (similar to the "Jim Crow" laws in the USA) which were introduced. Under these, people had to be registered according to their racial group; interracial sex and marriage were prohibited, and residential areas were strictly segregated, as were schools, trains, buses, beaches, toilets, parks, stadiums, ambulances, hospitals, and cemeteries. These laws were strictly (and often brutally) enforced.

The fight against apartheid began in 1948 with the African National Congress (ANC) advocating a policy of non-violence with resistance taking the form of boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and non-cooperation. Frustrated by the inability of peaceful protest to achieve results, members of the ANC broke away to form the PAC, under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe.

Sobukwe advocated mass action against discrimination. The PAC planned an anti-pass campaign whereby PAC supporters around the country were to leave their passes at home and offer themselves up for arrest at their nearest police station. The protest took place on 31 March 1960. On this day, protestors were met by armed policemen – confronted by thousands of protestors in Sharpeville, police shot into the crowd, killing 69 people, while two people were shot dead in Langa. This would become known as the Sharpeville Massacre.

The aftermath of Sharpeville was widespread condemnation from other parts of the world, which fuelled anti-apartheid sentiments. The government declared a state of emergency on 30 March 1960. Mass arrests ensued (more than 18,000), and almost all African leaders were imprisoned. The ANC and PAC were banned on 8 April 1960, forcing the movements underground.

The Sharpeville Massacre was thus a turning point in the liberation struggle. In response to a more brutal and intensified era of state repression, the armed struggle was born. However, the liberation movement soon suffered a major setback with the arrests of key ANC leaders including Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki,

Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg and Nelson Mandela, who were subsequently tried for treason in the infamous Rivonia Trial. The result of this was that Mandela and seven of his colleagues were sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in June 1964.

From 1967, the ANC concentrated on launching attacks on the government from outside the country, but the Internal Security Act (1972) gave police powers to detain people without trial for a renewable period of 90 days.

In 1976 a law was passed stipulating that mathematics and social sciences be taught in Afrikaans. In Soweto, a student protest demonstration was fired upon and two students were killed. This led to clashes between the community and the police and spread to other black townships. Steve Biko's death in detention in 1977 ushered in further resistance against apartheid. During this time, a generation of students became committed to putting liberation before their own education. Thousands passed through South Africa's borders for military training in Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana and other countries.

It soon became evident that the apartheid system could not sustain itself and resistance flared up between 1984 and 1986 with the support of increased international condemnation. Measures included the passing of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act by the US Congress in 1986. With an economy in a tailspin and their backs to the wall, the National Party government had no other option but to negotiate with Nelson Mandela and other resistance leaders. Mandela was released in February 1990; the petty apartheid laws were repealed in 1991 and on 27 April 1994, South Africa's first non-racial democratic elections were held, with the ANC winning a 63% majority and Nelson Mandela becoming the first democratically elected president.

I count myself lucky to have come of age during the dying days of apartheid, and luckier still to have come of age as a writer in a democratic South Africa. Of course, no young democracy is without its problems, but what gratifies me is that I am free to write what I like – without censorship or fear of reprisal.

While I might enjoy the pool, the poker, the waking up late and compare participating in the IWP to a being a child on summer camp with the absence of parents and responsibilities, I am fully aware of whose shoulders I am standing upon. And I am grateful.