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Reading Steve Biko Through Contemporary South African Fiction: Black Consciousness as a Force for Something Else

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The violent uprisings that swept through South Africa in 1976 and 1977 began with a single protest by Soweto junior high school students against the use of the Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction. This advanced challenging of the "colonization of consciousness" within black schools effectively triggered a large-scale insurrection (Semela, Thompson, & Abraham, 1979). Within a few days, the students had gained the support of both their parents and teachers, but the authorities continued to demand that Afrikaans remained as the language of instruction. There were no leaders guiding the student protests, just a small group of militant young people from Orlando West Junior High School who, together with friends from other schools, took the step of organizing a general demonstration, visiting all local schools to gather support. On June 16th 1976, 30,000 students gathered at Orlando West, far exceeding the organizers' expected turn-out. As the protest of these students spread to the streets, police opened fire on them without warning. The number of dead students would be estimated at between 170 and 700.

While the violence of the South African State succeeded in forcing the students to abandon their demonstration, it could not prevent the ensuing rampage of destruction through the streets of Soweto. Rioting soon broke out in many townships as the original grievance of the student group both inspired and was superseded by a questioning of the entire apartheid system. By 1976, the South African state was in full retreat as black students were in near daily confrontation with the police force. Many schools were burned, as were most beerhalls in the black townships. Students and other young people prevented black workers from going into Johannesburg, blockading and sabotaging transportation systems. Even after the coercion had ceased, it is estimated that black worker strikes in Cape Town and Johannesburg were over 80% effective and many workers that did report only did so in order to sabotage white industry. Due to their absence at work, the adult black population was drawn into confrontations with the South African security apparatus that typically were participated in primarily by students while their parents were away at work (Semela et al., 1979). These uprising would continue for two years and spread throughout the entirety of South Africa.

This period of the mid 1970's – marked by events such as the Soweto rebellion described above and the Durban Strikes of 1973 – signaled the revival of black politics in South Africa. In the vacuum created by the outlawing of black political parties and the imprisonment of their leadership, the PAC, ANC, and CPSA had virtually no presence inside South Africa. The new wave of black political mobilization consisted of government backed neo-ethnic politicians such as Buthelezi as well as the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) who supported the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC). These schools of black political thought "owed virtually nothing" to the old guard of revolutionary

exiles (Halisi, 1999, p. 110). It has even been said that the primary accomplishment of the BCM was its "leav[ing] in the dust the false goals and methods of the struggles of the forties and fifties" while exposing "the ineffectual strategies of the traditional 'liberation' organizations" (Semela et al., 1979). But what was the BCM and how was their cultural and political philosophy able to inspire mass actions such as the Soweto uprisings? In answering this question, I will turn to works of post-apartheid South African fiction in order to highlight the lasting influence of BCM thought as well as utilize the work of these writers to illustrate the socio-political context in which this new political philosophy was created and thrived. I argue that these writers' works highlight the anti-assimilationist philosophy of the BCM as well as paint a picture of the vibrant black South African culture in which Biko pinpointed alternative ways of being together in everyday life that, if embraced, could function as a revolutionary political force.

The emergence of the BCM is connected to the events of the 1960's. After the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the National party government passed harsher laws, extended the use of torture and imprisonment without trial, and jailed, banned, or exiled the majority of black liberation political leaders ("Black Consciousness Movement," n.d.). The organizations that came to fill the power vacuum were united loosely around Black Consciousness ideals put forth by political theorist and activist Steve Biko in direct black response to Afrikaner Nationalist Party white power ("Black Consciousness," n.d.).

Steve Biko observes that the black South African is a defeated shell of a person, human only in form. His philosophy seeks to instill a new-found pride in black South Africans as well as in their culture, religion, and values – demanding that these have just as much to offer to society as do white scientific and technological advances. With a goal of creating solidarity amongst the oppressed, Biko emphasizes that blacks, Indians, and coloreds are all disenfranchised by the same system, and deliberately oppressed to varying degrees in order to foster inter-group tensions that function to maintain a stratified society easily controllable by the white minority. Biko's vision of black consciousness aims to bring about a South Africa where all groups can live without the fear of group exploitation and participate in a democratic government ("Black Consciousness," n.d., p. 2).

Christopher Hope has noted: "One thing apartheid did savagely well was to undermine the reality of love, sex, friendship, family. It made violence normal but love criminal. It made all liaisons dangerous -- especially for those who were not quite black and not quite white" (Hope, 1999). Achmat Dangor's poetic and haunting multi-generational history *Kafka's Curse* presents the type of institutionalized violence that Hope refers to; a violence, as Biko points out, directed at all non-white South Africans. Omar Khan is a Muslim of Indian

heritage who attempts to assimilate into South Africa's racially hierarchical society, posing as a Jewish man by changing his name to Oscar Kahn and living with his white wife in wealthy suburban Johannesburg. Paradoxically, his brother Malik is a local politician who remains devoted to his religion and heritage, despite the hardships that embracing his identity entails within an apartheid State. Throughout *Kafka's Curse*, Dangor highlights the tendency amongst males in the Khan legacy to desire things outside of what is delineated by their raced and classed identity. In order to have the things they desire - be it wealth, women, etc. - they are forced to transform into other people and take on secretive lives.

The parables in *Kafka's Curse* illustrate the lengths to which South African Indians must go in order to enjoy the privileges of whiteness under an apartheid system and the hardships that they face in the process. As mentioned, Omar Khan resorts to adopting a new identity as a Jew in order to access the exclusive world of white South Africans. Dangor (2000, p. 8) describes the slow decline of Omar/Oscar as his breathing reverses, causing him to take in carbon dioxide and breath out oxygen. Plants are brought to his bedroom in order to increase the oxygen level, but they "struggle against some unnatural presence". Oscar's wife Anna can no longer take the "betrayal" of Oscar's illness and so moves in with her brother Martin and his wife Helena. Martin explains the possibility to Anna that Oscar's condition may be the result of "Kafka's curse," as Oscar seems to be undergoing some form of transformation during the nighttime hours. In the time Anna lives with Martin and Helena, the world around her likewise begins to transform. Mandela's government comes to power and the maid of the house, Wilhelmina, announces that she is leaving "to be home with *her* people to see one of her *own* become the country's president (Dangor, 2000, p. 19). Upon returning to her own house months later, Anna finds that Wilhelmina and her husband are living in the back quarters, and have no intention of moving out or reassuming the role of servants (Dangor, 2000, p. 27). As Anna enters the house in which her husband had "lay dead…for many months," she finds that within the main bedroom, "a tree had thrust up through the floor," and that "flowers sprouted in a profusion of colours from the dark, disinterred earth" of the room whose walls had become covered over with green moss (Dangor, 2000, p. 28).

Omar the Indian Muslim, after transforming into Oscar the white Jew, has now transformed once again, simultaneous to the transformation that has occurred in his country as apartheid officially comes to an end. One is left though asking the question: would the end of institutionalized racism in South Africa have provided Oscar with the opportunity to become Omar again, or would lingering societal racism still have existed that would have continued to force him to pretend to be something closer to white in order to access the type of privilege that he had grown accustomed to? Perhaps in Oscar's exit from the world of

humans, Dangor wishes to illustrate the futility (or even immorality) of attempting to achieve personal gain and life improvement via assimilationist cooperation with, and participation in, racist social, political, and economic institutions.

Rather than follow Omar's path of seeking integration into such white institutions, Biko envisions a movement from within the black community in which blacks rally together "around the blackness of their skin…to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind[ed] them to perpetual servitude" (Biko, 2002). Before political power could be achieved, the BCM felt that blacks must come to view blackness not as a matter of pigmentation, but a reflection of mental attitude and method of oppression and exploitation. Black Consciousness sought to reclaim blackness from its ties to the political subjugation of the apartheid system. Exalting black culture was in and of itself viewed as an act of defiance, providing an alternative to trying to pass as a colored or Indian South African ("Black Consciousness," n.d., p. 2).

In the novel *Mother to Mother*, Sindiwe Magona explores a world rife with loss, violence, disappointment, and heartbreak. However, in telling the story of Mandisa, Magona paints a vivid picture of a vibrant and rich black South African culture, a culture that the BCM viewed as possessing infinite power as a source of pride in the struggle against oppression. Magona describes Mandisa's childhood in Blouvlei, prior to the government forced relocation of all blacks to the townships. Describing a typical Friday of her childhood, Mandisa says: "Things happen on Fridays. Good things. Lovely things. Delicious things. Everything seemed expanded and carefree" ((Magona, 2000, p. 49). Life in an urban landscape with shops stocked with goods and busy paved streets provides an environment in which children can "play outside and not come inside till well into the night" (Magona, 2000, p. 49). On the this Friday, Mandisa goes on a journey "out of the house, across the field of scraggy grass, past the little dam fringed with a thin crop of straggling reed" to Mama Mandila's shop to purchase "the best, the most scrumptious, cookies in all Blouvlei" (Magona, 2000, p. 49). Later in the evening, Mandisa assists in serving a group of men who come to her house to "cool themselves and wash away the cares of the work week" with her mother's ginger beer (Magona, 2000, p. 51). The life Mandisa describes, while one of poverty and hard work, is nonetheless rich with friendship, joy, leisure, and community.

The forced resetting of blacks intentionally sought to fragment their rich culture. As Mandisa describes: "We got here, and everything and everyone changed" (Magona, 2000, p. 66). Despite the fact that, from an aesthetic perspective, the homes they are moved into appear to be of higher quality, Mandisa describes how theses homes in actuality led to the breakdown of community and cultural bonds: "In their wood and zinc and cardboard houses with wooden windows, they'd needed no curtains or carpets or fancy store-bought

furniture. In their brand-new brick houses of the township, with their glass windows, concrete floors, bare walls and hungry rooms, new needs were born" (Magona, 2000, p. 67). In order to meet these imposed needs, mothers "who had been there every afternoon to welcome [children] home when [they] returned from school, were no longer there. They were working in white women's homes. Tired, every day when they returned. Tired and angry" (Magona, 2000, p. 67). Forced into a situation of economic disempowerment and servitude, the familial culture of South African black communities was shattered, replaced by a culture of hardship, isolation, and violence. The offsetting of this type of intentional fragmentation of black communities by the Apartheid government and the emphasizing of black cultural heritage as a political force functioned as driving goals of BCM thought and activism.

     The BCM recognized the potential political strength of a united black alliance and therefore stressed a "totality of involvement" in order to offset the white power structure's reliance on the exploitation of black community fragmentation. Biko stresses the need for black leadership in the anti-apartheid movement, believing that only blacks have a true vested interest in ending apartheid. He targets white liberals in particular, pointing out that even if genuine in their desire for social justice, they are simply not able to grasp the enormity of the apartheid problem nor how engrained their own privilege is. Biko points out that whites who are able to lead comfortable lives in South Africa under an apartheid system can never be truly committed to a revolutionary struggle. Political action for such liberals functions as a recreational activity that helps to ease their consciousnesses rather than as an "all-consuming campaign for survival" (Magona, 2000, p. 49).

     Biko sees black consciousness at the "outcome of struggle and introspection" (Halisi, 1999, p. 120). He states: "The first step is to make the black man come to himself; to pump life back into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity…This is what we mean by an inward-looking process" (Biko, 2002, p. 25). This inward looking process is the core of Biko's new theory of political consciousness for black South Africans. Individual transformation is seen as enabling mass revolutionary action. Thus, the BCM focused on "culture, community, and the dimension of everyday life as the most important reference points for political activity" (Halisi, 1999, p. 121). Many followers of the BCM began to conclude that mass movement was the preferred expression of mass consciousness. While most of the previous generation of leftist South African revolutionaries believed that leadership (in the form of the Leninist vanguard party) was necessary in order to educate the masses, Biko feels that this education can be accomplished without a party apparatus, reaching the conclusion that "committed intellectuals armed with knowledge of popular culture" can

successfully utilize this culture to "breath life back into the oppressed" (Halisi, 1999, p. 121).

In Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of Dying*, we see a fictional account of how an inward looking process in one's everyday life can lead to the type of positive transformation that Biko envisions. Surrounded by an environment of poverty and violence, Toloki supports himself as a paid mourner who grieves at funerals. He is reunited one day with his childhood friend, Noria, a former prostitute from his home village who has lost two children. Despite the near constant hardships that both characters have experienced in their lives and the fact that they are surrounded by horrible violence, Toloki and Noria both draw optimism from their friendship with each other, finding happiness in the simpler aspects of day-to-day life. Toloki assists Noria in building a shack from supplies that he scavenges from around the city. They work throughout the night on the construction of the shack, constructing a "masterpiece" in the light of the full moon (Mda, 2002, p. 58). Toloki and Noria complete the shack as the sun rises the next morning. The house is a "collage in bright sunny colours" that would "certainly be at home in any museum of modern art" (Mda, 2002, p. 67). As they gaze at the house that they have built, they burst out laughing, overwhelmed with elation. Toloki states: "I did not know that our hands were capable of such creation" (Mda, 2002, p. 67).

This creativity and the power of friendship and community enable Nokia and Toloki to lead fulfilling and dignified lives despite being forced to exist in a context of structural poverty and violence. Their optimistic outlooks and sense of purpose and inner peace enable them to contribute positively and selflessly to their community. Recognizing that those around him are suffering constantly over the deaths of lived ones, Toloki mourns for their losses, providing what is described by the narrator as "an aura of sorrow and dignity that we last saw in the olden days when people knew how to mourn," to the funerals of his neighbors (Mda, 2002, p. 109). Despite having suffered great loss herself, Noria is a pillar of her community. Her neighbor, Madimbhaza, has many children, some of whom are physically handicapped. Noria visits her daily to assist with taking care of them and helps to get them ready for church on Sundays. (Mda, 2002, p. 118). Additionally, Noria is involved with a women's organization that meets for the purpose of improving conditions in their community (Mda, 2002, p. 119). Noria's focus on community activism and the pride and dignity with which she approaches everyday life is an example of the type of individual day-to-day sociality that the BCM saw as having the potential to transform society.

In the literary works of Dangor, Magona, and Mda, we read stories of black South Africa that highlight the very essence of Steve Biko's black consciousness philosophy. Rather than seek integration into the hegemonic structures of white South Africa, Biko encouraged black South Africans to recognize the richness and value that already existed in their own culture,

experiences, and communities. Although Biko may be viewed as a hero by South Africa's upwardly mobile black middle class, his celebration of blackness was "based on a nonessentialist… understanding of struggle…that sought not to mimic white society" through the generation of black economic empowerment within a colonial and capitalist system, but rather, to "inaugurate something completely different" (Mngxitama, Alexander, Gibson, & more, 2008, p. 246). Just as Dangor illustrates in his account of Omar's disappearance from the human world following his successful integration into white society, the assumption that there is no alternative to capitalist society – and that liberation by necessity involves ascribing to its value system and ascending through its hierarchical structure –is an assumption that Biko sees as entirely problematic. As he states in *I Write What I Like*: "The concept of integration, whose virtues are often extolled in white liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions that embrace white values…This is white man's integration based on exploitative values" (Biko, 2002, p. 101).

As black South Africans are encouraged to embrace their "Rainbow Nation" by becoming responsible and productive citizens, Biko's writings remind us that a reliance on hegemonic Western thought that posits liberalism, capitalism, and statism as the only acceptable expressions of the social, economic, and political, simply reproduces the material conditions of apartheid in the lives of the majority of black South Africans. In the literary works of Magona and Mda, we see a rich and vibrant description of black culture and community that is not beholden to these Western formations. It is in this black culture that Biko sees such potential for the transformation of black lives. Just as Noria and Toloki embrace creativity and optimism as they imagine a life together in a beautiful, expansive garden – thus finding the strength to help their community and enrich their own personal lives – Biko encourages black South Africans to creatively discover alternative ways of being together in this world. Hard work, capitalist accumulation, and participation in state-level electoral politics are not what bring happiness to the lives of Mda's characters. Rather than seek a freedom whose meaning is defined by the very system and apparatuses that oppress, Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy sees a type of freedom as already existing within the everyday lives, communities, and relationships of the black South Africa described by Magona and Mda – a freedom that, if embraced, can function "as a force for something else" (Mngxitama et al., 2008, p. 248).

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