

# *PREFACE: TENDING OUR MOTHERS' GARDEN*

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I HAVE BEEN teaching a course on Black Consciousness poetry in universities for close to seven years and have been nagged by the silence and absence of women in that unfolding radical moment.

For about five years now, every August, the month in which South Africa marks Women's Month, an image from the 1980s of Minister Lindiwe Zulu circulates on social media. She looks away from the book in her hands to confront us with a direct gaze, a Kalashnikov resting easily next to her hip. The image represents a battle fought with both ideological and military warfare; what the Cold War machine would have called soft power (culture) and hard power (artillery). That image of a female guerilla looks as provocative as it does organic: the people closest to the pain should be closest to power, driving and informing the contours and contents of a revolution. The country's history dictated its constitution: black, hypermasculine, clandestine, and Molotov-wielding. The battle lines were drawn along racial lines exclusively. When the white oligarchy peddled fear in their white subjects through the image of *swartgevaar*, what they conjured was not black women. But history absolves them today. Their variegated voices, erased by national liberation narratives, shall be heard. Black women were at the frontlines. In the underground they were confronted with a distinctive battle, against both the white supremacist machine impaling their families and communities, and against hetero-patriarchy within their ranks. To be a female guerrilla was to submit oneself to multiple warfares. They were in the trenches of Tanzania, Angola, and Mozambique as fighters, teachers, students, guerillas, and nurses.

It was in this context that Lindiwe Mabuza championed the *Malibongwe* book project. She drafted a letter to head of the ANC Women's Section, Florence Maphosho, to propose the idea. Mabuza asked Maphosho to disseminate the letter to all the women in the camps, offices of the ANC around the world, and at the nascent Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO) in Tanzania. There was great interest: hand-written submissions

from all the camps began to arrive in Lusaka. Angela Dladla-Sangweni, Mabuza's sister-in-law, helped to type all the poems. Mabuza had the full manuscript by the time she went to Sweden in 1979. At the time she was also at the helm of fundraising to construct the new SOMAFCO, and had arranged for artists within the Angola camps to contribute drawings and illustrations which she could sell to advance that cause. She sold the originals in several Scandinavian countries, as she was ANC's official representative to the entire Nordic region, but kept copies for inclusion in *Malibongwe's* first English edition. She approached the then-secretary at the Center for International Solidarity in Sweden, Bjorn Andreasson, to help with funding the publication of the poetry anthology. While this was in the pipeline, a German translation became the first version of *Malibongwe* to be published, by Munich-based Weltkreis-Verlag in 1980. Translated by Peter Schütt, this edition was expedited by the ambassador of the ANC Mission for the Federal Republic of Germany and Austria, Tony Seedat, and wife, Dr Aziza Seedat. They had already been in liaison with the publisher in 1980, who was at the time publishing another South African poetry collection by Keorapetse Kgositsile titled *Herzspeuren (Heartprints)*, at the behest of Aziza Seedat.

In 1981, Bengt Säve-Söderbergh of the Centre for International Solidarity of the Labour Organisation in Sweden had taken over the full publication process, and published 2 000 English language copies of *Malibongwe*. Most copies were distributed by ANC officials around the world, at the discretion of the party's Chief Representatives. At subsequent ANC meetings and rallies, people were reading the women's poetry. Meanwhile, Säve-Söderbergh approved funding for Erik Stinus to translate the anthology into Swedish and Danish, copies of which were published in 1982 by the anti-apartheid solidarity group Mellemsfolkeligt Samvirke. Later in the 1980s, the Finnish Peace Committee translated and published a small run of the anthology in Helsinki. The demand for *Malibongwe's*

German version resulted in a second edition being reprinted in 1987. Inspired by the illustration and design of Kgositsile's collection, this edition carried illustrations by ANC member and eminent abstract expressionist Dumile Feni, including one on its cover. These networks of international solidarity and support attest to the power of culture in fostering the political tools of revolution. By reprinting one of Feni's awe-inspiring pieces on the cover of this edition, we carry on this spirit of collaboration.

Some of the poets in this anthology have used pseudonyms as they were underground. The editor Lindiwe Mabuza is listed as Sono Molefe. She has provided a list of confirmed birth names of some contributors: Gloria Mntungwa's birth name is Belinda Martins; Jumaimah Mutaung is Yvonne Modiagotle; Lerato Kumalo is S'bongile Mvubelo; Rebecca Matlou is Sanki Mthembu-Mahanyele; Alice Tsongo is Phumza Dyanti; Mpho Maruping is Mpho Msimang; Susan Lamu is Ribbon Mosholi; Baleka Kgositsile is now Baleka Mbete; and Duduzile Ndelu is Thuli Kubeka. Say their names and afford them their place in literary and political history! The following contributors have since passed on: Belinda Martins, Thuli Kubeka, Phumzile Zulu, and Mpho Segomotso Dombo. May their revolutionary souls rest in peace.

Decades later, in the dispensation for which they sacrificed their lives, their work is virtually unknown, out of print and circulation. The absence was loud for I knew deep in my bones that as long as there were women fighting in uMkhonto we Sizwe, there had to be women writing poetry that encapsulated the moment. I initiated a project titled 'Recovering Subterranean Archives', the main objective of which was to research into South African culture in exile. It was a logical step in the face of a missing national archive. The pursuit of such a rich record would have to entail interviews and physical tracking of the ANC's activities.

I came to know of *Malibongwe* through my personal project on the towering figure of Keorapetse Kgositsile – statesman, former national poet laureate, and academic. I had previously seen the poetry of ANC women in exile interspersed with that of their male comrades, published in the anthology *Somehow We Survive* (1982), which Kgositsile had assembled and sent to the New York publisher, Thunder's Mouth Press. This piqued my curiosity

on whether there was not a full-length anthology of their poetry elsewhere. He revealed to me the anthology whose second English edition you now hold in your hands. The sense of urgency was acute in getting this book republished, to change the narrative of women's involvement in the cultural war against apartheid and in the black liberation movement.

Through the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation I was able to secure the funds to reproduce this important text against all odds related to rights. Nick Mulgrew of uHlanga stepped up and investigated the genesis of the book, secured me an interview with Dr Lindiwe Mabuza, and motioned the process forward. I am grateful to Makhosazana Xaba for weaving a brilliant and timely introduction, and am proud to be able to tend to the seeds that our mothers planted for us. Thank you too to my colleague Dr Wamuwi Mbao, as well as the participants of the January 2019 colloquium on the repatriation of South African culture from exile. Finally, thank you to Marriam Diale, daughter of Dumile Feni and representative of his Estate, for permission to reprint her father's work.

May this book contribute to the deep listening of our elders' struggles, and may it give us courage to fulfil to our own generation's mission.

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# INTRODUCTION

MAKHOSAZANA XABA

“WHAT DOES IT mean to giggle at the wrinkled hands that pried open bolted doors so we could walk in and take a seat at the table?” Grace A. Musila, a literary scholar with interests in (among others) gender studies, the African intellectual archive, and postcolonial whiteness, raised the above question in a recent article about the contribution made by postcolonial theorists – those who “fought the epistemic injustice of canonising certain literature over others” – to our current times. Grace’s question is pertinent and timely, and shouldn’t be limited to being asked of postcolonial theorists. The South African edition of *Malibongwe* – compiled and edited by Sono Molefe, a.k.a. Lindiwe Mabuza – excavates the names of poets whose wrinkled hands contemporary Black women poets need to know about and then acknowledge whichever way they see fit. Some might want to shake their hands in gratitude. Others might wish to hold hands, just as a way to connect. Some might want to buy some moisturising hand cream and offer it. Hopefully none will giggle.

Giggling at the poets and poetry borne of what the foreword to the original edition called “a love deeply rooted in their usurped land” would constitute a failure to recognise their significance. To return to Grace:

One thing Black women artists have taught us is the importance of acknowledging our intellectual histories and those who dreamt the futures we enjoy, and our responsibility to dream more livable futures for those behind us.

While living in exile I knew about the existence of *Malibongwe*, but I never held a copy in my hands. It was only in the late 1980s that I met Lindiwe, as well as three of the book’s contributors, Baleka Kgositsile, Ilva Mackay and Rebecca Matlou. While I lived in Lusaka, Zambia, I shared a

communal African National Congress (ANC) home in Chilenje with Rebecca, while Baleka lived close by, no more than a ten minute walk away. Eventually I learned that the two of them were poets. Later, I learned that Lindiwe and Ilva were also poets. I never came across their work while in exile.

What I do know is that these poets – or these hands, to return to Musila’s metaphor – pried open bolted doors so I could walk in and claim a chair around the literary table, even though I never wrote a single poem while living and moving within the ANC spaces and places in exile. These poets’ multiple identities as comrades spanned from being activists to ambassadors (Chief Representatives as we called them, pre-1990), as well as combatants, feminists, guerillas, mothers, public intellectuals, scholars, sisters, wives, writers, and more.

For this anthology, I wish to call them comrades-cum-poets. These poets are, for me, living examples of the ever-expanding range of identities we can claim, as women. Although I have loved and enjoyed poetry all my life, it was only in 2000 that I began to claim it and write. It became an easy transition because in my earlier life I had known Black women who were poets. To finally place my hands on the *Malibongwe* manuscript makes me want to say: Malibongwe indeed!

*Malibongwe* is an anthology of sixty poems with contributions from nineteen poets including one who chose to stay anonymous. Choosing to be anonymous in that time was of course about safety and security. Lindiwe also uses a pen name, Sono Molefe, as both editor of the anthology and author of “We demand punishment”, its last poem. Coincidentally, the four poets I met in Lusaka each contributed the most poems: Lindiwe eleven (twelve, counting the one written as Sono Molefe), Baleka eight, Rebecca seven, and Ilva five.

Unsurprisingly, although there are many contributors, *Malibongwe* speaks as a collective voice. To illustrate, I have chosen some words from Lindiwe-as-Sono-Molefe’s foreword to the original anthology:

## We shall be free

“We shall be free”

Is the tough fibre that binds.

Who are these women?

They are no striking personalities individually.

There is no romance here, all attest

a love rooted in their usurped land

No academic optimism

No unwarned pessimism

Only pounding reality

Now unpalatable – now lifting

Always moving towards the ultimate success

This collective voice:

People you can hear and know.

Find them: discover some peculiarities

Then love the harmony of song.

Pounding reality. Pounding. Reality pounding. Reality. How do we understand this pounding reality of the now-wrinkled hands that pried open bolted doors? Where are they? How would they speak about their hands today? It is encouraging to know that these once-bolted doors are now open and the tables have empty chairs to sit on. Even though the conversations may be divisive, heated, infuriating, insulting and patronising (and others even stage walk-outs), a reconvening can be organised. A return to the table is always a possibility. There are no more bolted doors! What does it mean then to return to an anthology birthed during a period of bolted doors? What is the texture of today's reality? What is the rhythm of its pounding? What does today's pounding reality look, feel and taste like? What sound does it

make? What does it mean to engage with it? What continuities does the engaging unearth?



FIRST, SOME WORDS about *Malibongwe's* composition. There are six sections in the anthology: "Africa shall be free", "Birth and genocide", "Spirit of Soweto: the ghetto, massacres, resolve", "Women in struggle", "Our men who fought and died and fight", and "Phases of struggle: resolution, exile, perspective, love, call to justice and arms". Many of these themes remain as relevant in South Africa today as they were in the past, similar to how the inhumanity of the apartheid regime translated into inhumanities perpetuated by democratic regime. (Perhaps best exemplified by the Life Healthcare Esidimeni saga, in which more than 140 psychiatric patients in Gauteng died of starvation and neglect after the provincial Department of Health removed them from care.)

But while the themes carry over from the old to the new, specific examples do not always. Throughout *Malibongwe*, the poets honour prominent comrades, women who were imprisoned, executed, bombed or killed. Names of the women honoured by the poets in *Malibongwe* are Charlotte Maxeke, Dorothy Nyembe, Esther ka-Maleka, Helen Joseph, Lilian Ngoyi, Mary Moodley, and Paulina Mogale. My curiosity heightens whenever I come across the name of a woman who contributed to the struggle that I have never heard of, and invariably a research journey begins. This is my commitment to "self-education", one I have seen as necessary in a country where women's contributions to society are valued less than those of men, which often means that their names disappear. I had never heard of Esther ka-Maleka and Paulina Mogale until I read *Malibongwe*. These are, in the words of Mpho Maruping in her poem "To our mothers!", women on whose steps we need to tread.

There are fewer poems in "Women in struggle" than in the next section, which is devoted to men in the struggle. In an anthology by women I expected to see more poems about women specifically. That said, we also know that the apartheid regime targeted men consistently because of their visibility and



their embodiment of what the apartheid regime considered to be the “swartgevaar.” With this in mind – as well as the understanding of poetry’s propensity for speaking to, pointing out and denouncing the gross, the extreme, the most painful – I do understand why women wrote more poems about men.



WITH A BOOK like this, it is important to put the past and present in conversation. A number of researchers have published work on *Malibongwe* before this new edition. In 1992, the researcher Lynda Gilfillan published an article entitled “Black Women Poets in Exile: The Weapon of Words”, in which she analysed some of the poems in *Malibongwe*. She highlighted some poets for praise, and offered others literary critiques. She also discussed “lacks”, “avoidances”, “gaps” and “silences”, but pointed out that “The *Malibongwe* poets produced a particular cultural artefact at a specific historical conjuncture. The circumstances surrounding the production and publication of *Malibongwe* should therefore be taken into account” (88). Although I recommend a reading of this article in full, it’s worth considering its final paragraph in particular:

Black women may yet write poetry that is a weapon in a broader liberation struggle. The “warrior women” poets of the past may even become legislators in a future South Africa from which the father figure as well as a nation state have been exorcised. If so, they may then find that while words are effective literary weapons, they may also be used to weave. (89)

As I will revisit later, I would argue that, in fact, these warrior women achieved both: words were their weapons, but they were also what they weaved with to create artifacts of *both* political and literary value. As early as 1990 the Congress of South African Writers published the first collection of poetry by Rebecca Matlou (a.k.a. Sankie Dolly Nkondo, a.k.a. Sankie Mthembu-Mahanyele), *Flames of Fury and other Poems*, in which four poems (“Solomon

Mahlangu”, “A Gulp of Unity”, “Swim Comrade” and “Oliver Waka Tambo”) also appear in *Malibongwe*. In his introduction to this collection Patrick Wilmot writes that the author, “a poet and militant”,

is aware of the dual requirements of artistic form and political content. The poems are finely crafted, economical, fluid, imaginative. The images flow smoothly in articulate and coherent patterns of meaning. (5)

The political and the literary are not mutually exclusive, and should not be treated as such. The current agenda to rebuild South Africa is a familiar one, recently revisited, that focuses on the emotional healing of wounds inflicted by a systematically violent apartheid regime. This agenda greatly distances the conversations South Africans need to have about exorcising their nation state and its father figures. Truth and reconciliation were mere starting points of a process that has not yet finished. We are yet to see justice for crimes committed during the apartheid years.

Gloria Vangile Kgalane’s masters dissertation entitled “Black South African Women’s Poetry (1970–1991): A Critical Survey” has a chapter dedicated to poetry produced by Black women in exile. I recommend this dissertation highly, not least because it contextualises *Malibongwe* at many levels, as well as analysing it. In this analysis, Gloria identifies the poetry of Phyllis Altman and Lindiwe Mabuza in particular as “self-consciously ‘feminist’”, which “sets them apart from the more conventional ‘liberation poetry’” (133). I agree, but I wish to add that *Malibongwe* as a whole is a feminist *book project*. In an essay I wrote for *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000–2018*, I made the point that

The physicality of the book is an enactment of presence, a claim to visibility and an invitation to engagement. It is also useful for periodisation, quantification and analysis. The concreteness of a book therefore reduces the probability of erasure while mitigating against denial. (40)

*Malibongwe* made visible women's voices and ideas as literary contributions within a context that made visible and valued men more than it did women. It disrupted a patriarchal norm. Implicit in this is an understanding of women's multiple identities, beyond the narrow ones that are accepted and normalised by the ideology of hetero-patriarchy. In *Malibongwe*'s original sub-title, "Poetry is also their weapon", their identities as creative literary individuals are affirmed, confirmed and normalised. Of course, it is true that not all the contributors identify or identified as poets – writing poems does not automatically make a person a "poet"; nevertheless, thanks to *Malibongwe*, their contributions are now available for analysis and critique.

This then is the added significance of the return of *Malibongwe*, in its first South African edition. As the curiosity grows about and interest in the lives of South African former exiles, *Malibongwe* is a living archive that can be accessed with ease. It provides evidence of discernable meeting points between the past and the present. For instance, in the preface to this current edition, Uhuru Phalafala tells the story behind the concept and production of *Malibongwe*, personified in Lindiwe's leadership as an editor. It is a story of a specific historical conjuncture. The story unfolds in the telling of subsequent reprints and translated editions; a laudable testament to Lindiwe's passion as a feminist writer and curator. Her published poetry collections – *From ANC to Sweden* (1987), *Letter to Letta* (1991), *Voices that Lead: Poems 1976–1996* (1998), *Africa to Me* (1998), and *Footprints and Fingerprints* (2008) – are collective testament to her passion for poetry and her prolific contributions to literature. Her recent lifetime awards – the 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award for Arts Advocacy and the 2014 National Order of Ikhamanga, for her contribution towards the eradication of the oppressive apartheid system through the arts – make her legacy indelible, particularly as some of her poetry collections are now out of print. Lindiwe's work and legacy in the cultural sphere is a story we need to be able to tell with ease. The archives of her international diplomacy work may be alive in the countries where she served, but hopefully *Malibongwe* inspires us to ensure that her work is archived and accessible in the country of her birth, a country she had to leave in order to fight for it.

*Malibongwe* is like a child born in exile to struggle parents. After decades of living in exile, it is finally a returnee. Through its publication in South Africa it has now come back home, to claim space and live. Notably, like other literary and cultural projects and products associated with liberation movements in South Africa, some of them have continued to live inaccessible and often isolated lives in exile, usually in the archives of organisations that were part of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) internationally. I remember clearly in 2002 watching a documentary film, *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, and wondering just how many South Africans had access to it. I remember wondering how many South Africans knew of the use of music by ordinary ANC activists who were part of the musical group Amandla Cultural Ensemble that toured many countries of the world. These ANC activists did not have the kind of prominence that the likes of Miriam Makeba, Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela had. Like the majority of the poets contributing to *Malibongwe*, these comrades were no striking personalities individually. They were held together by the glue of their commitment to the struggle. Where is the story of Amandla Cultural Ensemble being kept? How accessible is it? What is to be learned from the experiences of this group? Was their music also their weapon?

In *Malibongwe* we witness how our past also resides in our present. We confirm yet again that history repeats itself. In Lindiwe's poem of just over twenty stanzas on the founding of the ANC at Mangaung, the speaker proclaims that "I was born / At the gathering of the brave". This speaker could well be a member of the Congress of the People (COPE), a party founded by disgruntled members of the ANC in 2008. They were brave, the odds high against them. The speaker could also be a member of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), founded by disgruntled members of the ANC Youth League in 2013. By then, the ANC was a century and one year old. They too were brave to stand apart.

Look too to the national #TotalShutdown of August 2018, where there were many gatherings of the brave, simultaneously, in many spots in the country, when the intersectional women's movement stood in protest against gender-based violence. Or to September 2019, when brave women

gathered for the #SandtonShutdown, outside the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, the most visible representation of the intensity of capitalism in South Africa, to protest against gender-based and xenophobic violence. Each gathering of the brave births change.

In *Malibongwe* we read poems on the inhumanity of the apartheid's institutionalised racism, yet the questions asked of that government may be asked of the current democratic government. The promises we pinned on a post-apartheid, constitution-grounded democracy have been falling from the tree of hope like rotting fruit. See the exposure of a deep-rooted and widespread corruption within state-owned enterprises, or the 2012 Marikana Massacre of protesting miners by members of the South African police force, or more generally the pounding reality of gender-based violence, which leaves us wondering whether South African men have any humanity at all.

The republication of *Malibongwe* in 2020 thus becomes a mirror-holding exercise for South Africans. Holding the mirror we must ask the question and delve into the answers to the question – in the words of Mongane Wally Serote, quoted on the back cover of Lindiwe's collection *Footprints and Fingerprints* – of what we need to do “to be a little more humane”. This question needs to become the rhythm of our daily lives.



I RETURN NOW to Lynda Gilfillan's reference to words being used as both weapon and weaving. The significance of *Malibongwe* as an excavation, or as a political and feminist project, does not only lie in its context or content, but also in its aesthetics. Accepting as I do just how deeply mired in controversy discussions about aesthetics can be sometimes, I cannot but share a few examples of what I consider to be exquisite writing in some of the poems, starting with the last two stanzas of the poem that opens the anthology, “Masechaba” by Ilva Mackay:

Africa  
the voice of your children  
erodes the mist-shrouded mountains

like hungry rain  
and cuts through the valleys  
like pounding rivers that  
that ravage and rape your fields

Africa  
today your rivers heal our wounds  
your fields offer us refuge  
and your mountains do not silence, no they hold and harbour  
the sounds of warriors answering the call for justice.

In this poem the spectacle of war and struggle are held inside the container of the African landscape. The container encloses them. They are almost hidden. Nature assumes the role of a holding, nurturing, comforting and safe fort and the health-giving rivers take on different roles. Whereas in the final stanza Africa's rivers heal, in the stanza before they pound, ravage and rape. The poem builds momentum delicately from the opening to the end, all the while grounded, literally, by the land, the sea, the rivers. It is a poem of hope, a vision of a future continent that nurtures and heals its inhabitants. It is an example of what Njabulo Ndebele argued for in his famous essay "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary", moving away from

a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon *subtlety of thought and feeling and never permits the sobering power of contemplation*, of close analysis, and the *mature acceptance of failure*, weakness and limitation. (42, my emphasis)

"Masechaba", for me, is an embrace (and illustration) of the sobering power of contemplation, and the mature acceptance of failure, which moves toward resolution: Africa is a "mother of children / destitute / dying", but nevertheless "determined / to prescribe themselves freedom / to describe themselves free." The political is still identifiable and audible in ordinary vi-

sions of nature. Africa becomes merely a name, a geographical marker, not the hyperbolically romanticised entity of a continent we so love and will die for. We therefore are invited to engage levelheadedly with its content while at one with the flow and rhythm of nature.

For a second example, read Baleka Kgositsile's poem "Umkhonto":

rhythm  
this dance is our future  
moving with the clumsy  
or graceful vigour of the present  
to the song of today  
echoed in our tomorrow  
rhythm  
we are all artists  
on this stage  
there is no break  
to this dance

This nine-stanza poem is intensely political in how it advocates for violence as part of the struggle for liberation. Yet also we read about rhythm and dance as propellers of the same struggle. Here, we find a subtlety of thought and feeling that Ndebele encourages. The commitment to the armed struggle is like that of artists on a stage; soldiers are prepared to die as simply as performers are prepared to dance. I hope Ndebele smiles.

In a third and last example on aesthetics I share the four lines that end Rebecca Matlou's poem "Solomon Mahlangu":

bow to fate  
hold its quivering tale  
(to you I say)  
I touch this darkness and give it meaning

A posturing and sloganeering poet may have just used Solomon Mahlangu's often-quoted last words: "My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom". But Rebecca's savvy has her use other words, "I touch this darkness and give it meaning". How much more understated can one be about an execution by the apartheid regime?

In these three examples, published in *Malibongwe* decades ago, it is clear that the poets were deliberate in their writerly craft. They weaved words to make poignant connections that were political, yes, but expressed with subtlety. The spectacle that was apartheid – even though it is the inspiration behind the poetry – recedes to the background and stays there. Artistic pleasure takes on centre stage. As we breathe, poetry becomes our oxygen.



I WISH TO discuss two themes visited upon in *Malibongwe* because of their renewed urgency in our current politics. The first theme is hope as expressed in the metaphor of dawn. The second is land.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa gave his State of the Nation address in 2018, his promise of a "new dawn" became a talking point. When public conversations and debates about accountability of government take place, this new dawn is often the most readily evoked expression because dawn is about new beginnings and is therefore promissory. Numerous poems in *Malibongwe* evoke hope despite the pounding reality of apartheid's crimes against humanity. In these poems we see a varying range of the usage of dawn as a metaphor:

When the streets and rivers of our land turn red  
it will be the dawn of the day  
our land will kiss freedom welcome

*From "For my unborn child" by Baleka Kgosistile*



The dawn of a dark day  
Misery's spouse  
The crying baby's body  
Hangs on the light scales  
of Kwashiokor

*From "One life lost" by Jumaimah Motaung*

Many seeking the light  
Have fallen before their dawn  
And I must go

*From "I must go: Do not mourn" by Fezeka Makonese*

With new dawn's energy  
I must strengthen my sinews  
For I have seen creatures stampede  
And build icebergs in Liberty's path  
But volcanic tides will charge  
Making love to our own ploughs  
Which must furrow for life

*From "Soweto wishes" by Lindiwe Mabuzza*

What is it today, what was yesterday  
shall tomorrow dawn to set for them?  
Who ever prophesied this black cloud  
this stiletto tear all of her here apart

*From "Mother patriot (June 16, 1976 Soweto)"  
by Rebecca Matlou*

for you and I met  
and always will  
to forge multiple dawns  
of new horizons

*From "To a comrade" by Lindiwe Mabuzza*

The numerous ways in which dawn is used re-iterates the point that the past lives in the present. We see the continuity in “and always will”. We see the broadness of the scope of work that needs to be done in “to forge multiple dawns”. And we see the boundaries being pushed farther and farther in “of new horizons”. Decades ago, Lindiwe Mabuza was suggesting that the change we want is in our hands and it is at many levels, on numerous fronts.

The second theme, land, also abounds in *Malibongwe*. In 2018 we witnessed a nationwide solicitation of views from the public on whether Section 25 of the Constitution of 1996 should be amended to include the expropriation of land without compensation, and the topic became the centre of many heated and appropriately emotional debates. Five years earlier nationwide events had focused on remembering the 1913 Land Act and its devastating effects on the lives of Black people. As Baleka Kgositsile says in her poem, “Umkhonto”,

Yes  
our today’s dance  
towards a better tomorrow  
is dictated by yesterday

The “stench of colonialism”, as Baleka calls it in the same poem, will forever spoil the air we breathe for as long as the land question is not resolved to the satisfaction of Black people who were dispossessed. Many of the poets in *Malibongwe* refer to land directly, indirectly, tangentially and implicitly. Sometimes land is evoked in intensely emotional ways that make us revisit and thus rediscover the ordinary, Ndebele-esque, as in Fezeka Makonese’s “I must go: Do not mourn”:

These roses and other flowers  
In your garden urge me to go  
They evoke memories of wreaths

Memories of wreaths. Wreaths are markers of land. Wreaths signify death's pounding reality. If Fezeka were a posturing and sloganeering writer her focus would have been on the spectacle that was the oppressors who are the causes of these deaths she was referring to. To use Ndebele's words, Fezeka would have focused on the "massively demonstrated horror that has gone before" (38). Instead, she weaves words as she focuses on the subtlety of thought and feeling. She evokes a wreath, which says: land, flower, nature's beauty, the circle of life. The interiority evoked by Fezeka is soft, personal, engaging and tenderly emotional. When the horror that has gone before, is palpable in "urge me to go", these four short words deliver a clear decision, while we sit with contemplation upon roses and flowers, in the garden. We sit with art rather than politics. And so again, we breathe.



LET ME END with the poem of over thirty stanzas that ends *Malibongwe*, "We demand punishment", written by the editor Sono Molefe (a.k.a. Lindiwe Mabuza) which she dedicates to the poet Pablo Neruda. This poem is many things: a lesson in histories, a fingering of criminal acts from the colonial to the apartheid era, a demand for justice. Most importantly, it is about the justice we needed then and continue to need now.

Ovens of terror unleash their flames  
when orders to shoot to kill rampage our land

Remember Marikana?

They say kaffirs make good manure  
when they murder us

Today we could change one word "kaffirs" to "women" and the poem's sentiment would be same. The statistics are our witnesses.

We demand punishment on top of the forgiveness and reconciliation. We demand punishment of all the perpetrators of crimes against women and children. We demand punishment of all the criminals implicated in corruption. Punishment is justice, the poem suggests, and, it is our right to continue to demand it.

One of the main differences between the apartheid era and the post-1994 era is that the enemy was easy to point out. Lines have since been blurred. The enemy is textured differently. Criminal acts hide behind democratic functions. Lies posture as facts until proven otherwise. We can no longer use the word “comrade” without pondering upon it. Often, we have chosen not to use it.

The poets who appear in *Malibongwe* remind us of the cyclical nature of life. They urge us to ask ourselves; how many of the changes we have seen are the ones we really wanted? How many of the changes we welcomed have lost their significance? Just how much do we know about us, as people? How many of the changes we want sit like a mirage; too far to touch yet close enough to see?

*Malibongwe* may be a late returnee, but she is a welcome one. Hopefully libraries and archives in South Africa will bare their shelves in welcome as they stack her up in numbers. Thanks to Uhuru’s vision, we can now sit with the book in our hands and revisit the past through poetry and work out for ourselves just how much of our past has continued into our present. And, when we work this out, we can hopefully do what poetry often does, and be pulled into action.

The work of compiling and editing *Malibongwe* deserves acknowledgement, study and accurate positioning with the current political and feminist literary conversations. This work pried open bolted doors. And these hands, I believe, deserve delicately perfumed, moisturising hand cream that we must offer in abundance. I also think that these hands can do with an energising massage. What would be best is to ask what these hands need and respond appropriately. For now, I offer my writerly gratitude to these hands. We know that the editor Sono/Lindiwe, in her poem “To a comrade”, was as right back then as she is today:

comrade  
there is no exit  
when the sounds of history  
curdle our blood

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# *FOREWORD* TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

SONO MOLEFE

SUDDENLY THERE ARE women poets from South Africa. Phenomenal, some might want to acclaim. Praise and accolades is not what these women are after. They clearly want your heart, eyes and nerves to move your mind to what they know, so that understanding afresh, you might be inclined to act accordingly. “We are exploited and oppressed”, is what the collective voice states on behalf of those whose cries and words are muffled by bullet sounds plus fascist manoeuvres to bluff the unwitting. “We shall be free” is the tough fibre that binds those on both sides of the Apartheid divide.

But who are these women? As any of them will tell, they are no striking personalities individually. Yet as part of the face of the liberation movement of South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC-SA), they are simply formidable. They come to the world then, in the main, as members of the ANC. The names are there but that is only a partial story since full identity will only be possible after South Africa is free, and with genuine democracy.

For the moment suffice it to say there are those who battled police, their dogs and bullets on the streets of their country in 1976. There are students and former school-teachers. There are trained soldiers, daughters of workers, militant patriots fully engaged in the continuous act of liberation, one and all, struggle is their chosen path. The age range also represents that steady mounting dynamism of the oppressed of that land: a fifteen year old as assured of direction, unwavering side by side with a fifty year old, all challenging hurdles with energy derived from a tested and winning ideological perspective, affirming, questioning, developing ideas, forging ahead towards a victory no power on earth can deny the people of South Africa.

There is no romance here, though all attest a love deeply rooted in their usurped land. No academic optimism where illusory easy victories are spun out of pseudo-revolutionary theories! No unwarranted pessimism in the context of international and continental struggles. Only pounding reality, now unpalatable – now lifting, but always moving towards the known to-be-known ultimate success of the African Revolution. These lovers, then, speak

as one. But since this collective voice also means people, we hope you can hear and know the distinct voice through each individual emphasis, pitch, tone, syntax and idiom for these are singular voices too. Find them. Discover some peculiarities. Then love the harmony of song. Because in many exciting ways, these specific weights of melody blend into a ponderable sweetness of heavy harmony, rich symphony – a style and aesthetic that are thrillingly new: nerve-filled and public.

What we have then is a poetry bound up intimately with all their people's lives. We have a people impelled by the greatest vision there is: the total liberation of men, women and children – a country.

The poems also want to enter the nerve of the defenders and apologists of Apartheid, split it asunder with the panorama of extensive, conscious genocidal practices of the regime. Without South Africa's present political aberrations of justice and equality none of the voices in this collection would have opted for exile.

Yet because exile is transitory it is almost embraceable. But embraceable only as necessities that school, meetings that prepare one for the arduous task ahead. Exile and alienation are seen in relation to the fundamental alienation of the overwhelming working majority in South Africa from land, cultural wealth, wholesomeness – wholeness; all the products of that majority's sweat and blood – through general deprivation and exclusion from decisions affecting the people's lives. In this sense there is no self-pity. It is this political awareness and engagement with all aspects of South Africa that rescues their perspective from self-devouring individualism and from whining weakness.

This also accounts to some extent for the general tone of the collection which remains solidly communal. The public voice starts with people, revolves around them, peers into our eyes to see whether or not we refuse to see the ghastly deeds of "civilisation". Obviously these authors have a mission. Critical of the status quo, offering solutions, they offer no apologies for being supporters of the destruction of exploitation of man by man in their country, undivided.

If at the same time there is no conformity to "accepted" poetry norms in their message it is because mainly those acquainted with elements of traditional poetics would fully appreciate the mode within which some poems

are written. The rhetorical style of a number of the poems is a case in point. Because of the oral and hence public nature of traditional poetry, it has its own poetics, quite different from that conducive to quiet reading in one's study. Yet it is not a contradiction to say that even when read individually or privately, the poems still have spark to fire one in one's study, and the energy to move one from the study and merely studying. The art of these poems is, in part, their verbal structures that are shaped to be skilful oral agents as well as reminders. They are re-creative.

Many of the poems have been heard inside South Africa over Radio Freedom, the broadcast services of the African National Congress operating through the generosity and solidarity of several African states. In military training camps, the value of some has been firmly attested to by the applause from the exclusively South African audiences there. A few were heard at the Eleventh International Festival of Youth and Students in Cuba. Such poetry has always raised moral, giving impetus and emotional stimuli and dimensions to political content. Through this cultural medium, political consciousness has been elevated in many. So be it, women.

Amandla!