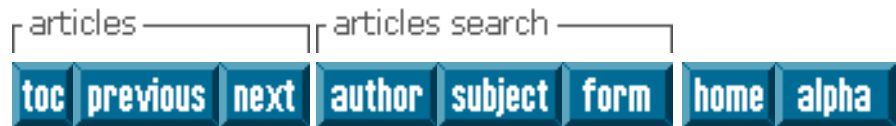


# Mafika Pascal Gwala (1947-2014): The poet-activist and the mirage of freedom.

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On-line version ISSN 2309-9070

Print version ISSN 0041-476X

### **Tydskr. letterkd. vol.52 n.1 Pretoria 2015**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v52i1.16>

#### TRIBUTE

## **Mafika Pascal Gwala (1947-2014) : The poet-activist and the mirage of freedom**

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Mafika Pascal Gwala who passed away in September at the age of sixty seven (67) will be remembered often as a cantankerous South African poet who made a notable contribution to South African English poetry. Born in Verulam in 1946, Gwala started writing in 1966 and his first poems and short stories appeared in *Nation*, *Realities* and *Ophir*. He edited the *Black Review* in 1973 and published essays in several books. Critics who have written on Gwala's work as a poet, critic and social commentator have noted the ways in which he was informed by the turbulent political climate of his time. His first collection of poems, *Jol'iinkomo* came out in 1974, which Stephen Bantu Biko, Gwala's close comrade in the Black Consciousness movement, was murdered in a Pretoria prison cell. 1982 saw the publication of his second volume of poetry titled *No More Lullabies*. In 1984, the acclaimed scholar of African oral literature Liz Gunner, a collection of praise poems titled *Musho!*.

In South African literary circles Gwala is often associated with Mongane Serote, Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Sipho Mhlophe and others who have been given the label of Black Consciousness poets by literary critics. Michael Chapman, the pre-eminent scholar of African literature has compiled an invaluable record of essays, reviews and interviews on the work of Gwala and his contemporaries in his book *Soweto Poetry* (1982). Although there were notable differences among them, the distinction of being creative spokespersons of the millions of disenfranchised South African citizens. In 1984 Gwala made it clear that he regarded his "writing as a cultural weapon" to be used to fight social injustice. He points out in his essay on Biko which appeared in Mothobi Mutloatse's *Reconstruction: 90 Years of His Legacy* that Gwala worked closely with Steve Biko and other Black Consciousness intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s. It would be simplistic to pigeonhole Gwala as a Black Consciousness activist as he was very much aware that Black Consciousness was a phenomenon of its time and that there were other political ideologies worth exploring. His vision of a more egalitarian society may be loosely characterized as being socialist in orientation. His reading of the world was not that of a life-long historical materialist who, until his death, was very sceptical of the system of capitalism which inevitably promotes greed, corruption and widens the gap between the rich and the poor. Both of his poems are very critical of what he considered to be the misguided pretensions and aspirations of the Black Consciousness movement of his time. He mockingly refers to the emergent black middle class as "black status seekers" in a poem of 1984.

Regrettably, during the first two decades of freedom in South Africa Gwala, who was obviously disgruntled, stopped writing poetry and disappeared from the literary scene spending most of his time in local *shebeens* in the township of Mpumalanga near Hammersdale.

It is evident from his critical essays and speeches that Gwala was a voracious reader who read African and American writers. Like the Afro-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance with whose work he was familiar, Gwala chose to confront social injustice head-on offering trenchant and unapologetic responses to critics of the literary merit of his poetry. He made it abundantly clear to the white liberal establishment that dominating the literary scene at the time that he was not prepared to conform to the demands of literariness as defined by university professors. In his poem titled "In Defence of Poetry", a poem generally regarded by critics as providing the manifesto of political commitment in the 1970s and 1980s, Gwala gives the rationale for his apparently "unpoetic" approach to poetry. In the poem he raises questions about the patently violent and repressive tactics of the apartheid regime including the deaths of school children and racial oppression. The final stanza provides a direct and unapologetic response to the standards:

As long as  
this land, my country  
is unpoetic in its doings  
it'll be poetic to disagree.

Largely because Gwala's work and that of his contemporaries was a direct response to the socio-political conditions of his time, his work will continue to appeal to the discerning literary historians interested in the complex interconnections between politics and literature. Gwala is one of the South African poets who, in the words of another prominent South African poet, Jeremy Cronin, have taught us to speak with the voices of this land. Gwala's departure leaves a void in the South African literary scene which can only be filled by the youth of a free South Africa made possible, in part, by his work.

as a cultural weapon. *Hamba kahle Mphephethwa!*

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