
African Literature:

Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man*

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My students and Botswana in general are faced with oppression as a fact of their lives. Although most American students are fortunate in not having to grapple daily with oppression, they, too, may face being oppressed because of their race, class, gender, or sexual preference. Using Mtutuzeli Matshoba's *Call Me Not a Man* (1979) as the central text in a unit on oppression would certainly benefit both my students and yours. In the first place, such a unit would help students understand the oppression they face and perhaps make them better able to respond to that oppression. In addition, such a unit may increase students' sympathies for the victims of oppression and perhaps even motivate them to act on behalf of those who are oppressed. At the very least, such a unit would promote an understanding of contemporary African political history, for as Matshoba explains in the introduction to his book,

I want to reflect through my works life on my side of the fence, the black side: So that whatever may happen in the future, I might not be set down as a blood-thirsty terrorist: So that I may say: "These were the events which shaped the Steve Biko and the Solomon Mahlangu, and the many others who came before and after them." (x)

Call Me Not a Man: A Brief Synopsis

This collection of short stories reflects a commitment to exposing the evils of the South African policy of apartheid and the common experience of the Blacks under that system. All of the seven stories clearly illustrate some of the different ways that oppression can be perpetuated. As M. Vaughan (1988) clearly points out,

Rather than character, Matshoba concentrates upon situation. Each story has an exemplary quality: it treats the situation that is its subject-matter as a model situation, from which lessons can be derived. (312)

"My Friend, the Outcast" describes the plight of a Black family that was evicted from its township house under false accusations that it had rental arrears. But the truth was that government officials had accepted a bribe from a young man who needed housing desperately. After his role in the whole eviction plan was discovered, the young man decided not to take the house but rather help the family recover it.

The little story, "Call Me Not a Man," focuses on the role of Black police reservists who have been co-opted into the South African oppressive machinery in order to perpetuate the ill treatment and exploitation of helpless Black workers. The process is described as dehumanizing and degrading to the reservists, their victims, and the powerless onlookers. Matshoba provides a vivid example of how the reservists victimize a migrant worker returning home after a long time because he does not have his "passbook" with him.

"A Glimpse of Slavery" throws light on the humiliating treatment of Black workers by their white co-workers. It also

describes the system by which pass offenders and criminals are forced into becoming farm labourers (slaves in Matshoba's terms) for the duration of their sentences and the kind of horrors this involves. (Trump 1988, 99)

In "A Son of the First Generation," Matshoba comments on the Immorality Act. The ill-fated affair between Martha, a young Black woman, and

David Steenkamp, a white man, led to the birth of a new “colored” child who represents the birth of a new generation in South Africa, a child whose very existence violates the Immorality Act. Matshoba uses this story to attack these laws. He explains,

But I do not see what can be immoral in the mere existence of a human being. Even the child born after an act of rape cannot be stripped of its right to exist, once born. . . . To me a so-called “colored” human being is a brother, conceived in the same Black womb as I. Child of a sister robbed of the pride of motherhood by the man-made immorality laws. (91)

Matshoba explains that “A Pilgrimage to the Isle of Makana” was inspired by the imprisonment of his brother Diliza in Robben Island (vii). He provides a detailed description of the journey he undertook to visit him. The story is interspersed with comments on the relevant aspects of South African history and on the process center, “the place Robben Island has in African consciousness” (Vaughan 311).

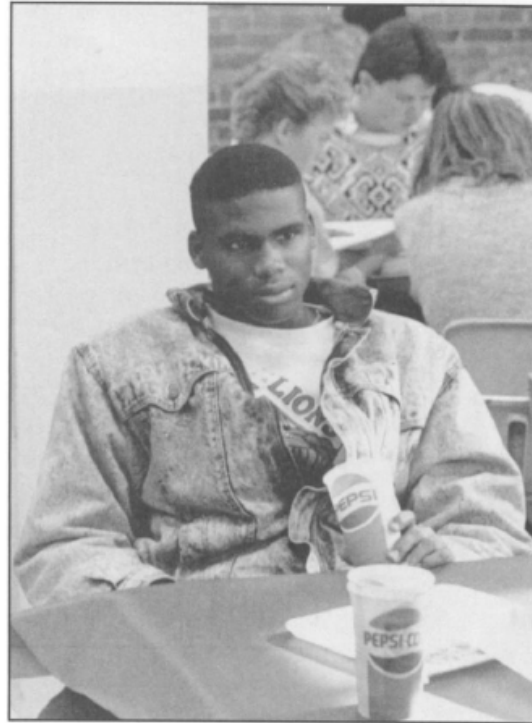
In “Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion,” the main focus is on a traveler who was going to visit friends in Umtata in Transkei. Through him and the journey he is undertaking, Matshoba focuses on the “creation” of the Transkei homeland/*bantustan* and its independence. The journey reflects that Transkei is “a land of a dying illusion.”

In “Behind the Veil of Complacency,” Matshoba creates an idyllic world presented by two young Black lovers, who wished that their happiness could last forever. However, their idyllic mood was completely shattered when a white shopkeeper accused Mapula (the young woman) of stealing an orange worth five cents.

Structuring the Unit

Although most students will have some experience with oppression, they may not bring a sophisticated understanding of the concept to their reading. Therefore, I developed my unit around a series of key questions designed to help students consider aspects of oppression that they might otherwise neglect.

1. What is the cause of the oppression?
2. What is the effect of the oppression on both the oppressed and the oppressor?
3. What is the response of the oppressed to their oppression?
4. Are there any possibilities for change?



These questions are a useful heuristic to help students expand their consideration of oppression. Asking the first question is important, for, as Jonathon H. Turner, Royce Singleton, Jr., and David Musick (1984) explain, “distinctive social, cultural, and biological attributes can serve as the basis for labeling targets of oppression” (4). Consistently asking this question will help students become aware of the many causes of oppression. Asking the second question is important, for it helps students understand that oppression harms both the oppressor and the oppressed, a point powerfully established in many of Matshoba’s stories but one that students often neglect. Asking the third question is important because it helps students begin to evaluate the range of responses available to the characters, from acquiescence to violence, instead of simply regarding their actions as inevitable. Finally, asking the fourth question is important, for it helps students do more than simply finish a story and say, “It’s so sad” or “It’s so wrong.” Such responses do little to solve the problems that Matshoba poses.

To introduce the unit I begin with a series of case studies that reflect different forms of oppres-

sion with which the students may be familiar. I design the case studies to highlight the importance of the key questions that I discussed above as well as to introduce vocabulary that will be useful for the rest of the unit—for example, stereotype and scapegoat. Through the course of the unit, we dis-

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cuss the stories in terms of the questions. We draw connections between our experiences and the experiences portrayed in the stories. For example, when we read “Three Days in the Land of a Dying Illusion,” we talk about the experience of the migrant laborers it portrays. Because many of my students have relatives who are or have been migrant laborers, we can compare their experiences to the experiences of the characters. Of course, making such connections will be more difficult for American teachers, but in this example, students could compare the experience of immigrants to the experience of the migrant laborers. Finally, I move my students to independence by having them work together to analyze the UNESCO film

This Is Apartheid (1970) and to produce a short play portraying an oppressive situation that we have not talked about in class.

The theme of oppression runs across the writing of most contemporary African writers throughout the Continent. Introducing your students to this theme through a unit on Mtutuzeli Matshoba’s *Call Me Not a Man* will help prepare them to read other African writers and may well help them realize that the problems he addresses affect them as well.

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EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Global Perspective—on the Home Front

Throughout the semester the object [in a freshman composition class] was to make all composition work, and particularly letter-writing, as real as possible. Following this plan, I arranged to have my class of boys write letters to a class of young men of varying ages in the night school. The young men were foreigners from the various countries of Europe. Some, who had come to visit relatives, could not return because of the war, others had been here for a year or more, but most of them had traveled to this country to become citizens. Some were well educated in their own languages, and practically all had a trade or profession.

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[On the day the responses came] The one exclamation was, “Why, they write better than we do! . . . The questions asked by my pupils were answered very frankly, and the boys were delighted with the descriptions which they received of life in European countries. They smiled at the mistakes in English idioms, but also noticed some mistakes similar to their own in the uses of prepositions and connectives. The last day of the semester the boys wrote answers, which were much better than the first letters.