A Voice from the Underground: Subversion and Containment in Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters*

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Abstract
This paper examines via a New Historicist frame of analysis in which *history* is itself a kind of *text*, Maishe Maponya's *Gangsters* as a fictional reenactment of actual lived experiences. Black consciousness playwrights have attempted with varying degrees of success to restage the black (historically, all non-whites) experience, thereby undermining the regime by exposing and challenging its segregationist and repressive policies. Maponya is one of such black consciousness ideologues and a forerunner of the black movement in the arts. The paper considers individual subversion as necessary (naturally, a backlash) under any oppressive system and examines the regime's *right* to overtly or covertly contain subversive tendencies and ensure order. The paper also locates the loose nature of the perpetrator (the so-called gangsters of the play) label; renegotiates the questions of power, representation, race, crime, subversion and containment, thereby *re*interpreting the authorial intention(s) on issues to do with perspectives, generalisations and reductive definitions and association. The paper further problematises the play's reductive notion of gangsters – to refer to Whitebeard and Jonathan – and reveals that humans typically have varied sides and put on different masks. It concludes that the theme of subversion and containment in the play is universal, and therefore is not restricted (unlike other specifics in the play) to South Africa.

Keywords: gangsters, subversion, containment, apartheid, Maishe Maponya

1. Introduction

Gangsters premiered at the Market Theatre in 1984 as part of a double-bill (with *Dirty Work*), with Maishe Maponya as Rasechaba,[1] Maytham as Whitebeared and Sol Rachilo as Jonathan. The play was restricted by the Director of Publications under the Publications Act of 1974 to the 'Laager' section of Market Theatre (Maponya 1995; Maponya 1986). The Laager's avant-garde and liberal audiences limited its outreach and political impact. As a result, it could not reach-out to the larger township audience(s), for which it was originally intended. The play's restriction as well as experimental history is a testimony to apartheid's far-reaching influence on the arts. Like other radical black works in apartheid South Africa, *Gangsters* suffered from the circumstances of its production. The apartheid period is important to this paper because it provided Maponya the materials with which he worked. The practices of theatre at the time of production of the play also influenced what he could depict and the manner in which it can be

[1] Maponya acted the role of Rasechaba (a male poet-activist) in the early run of the play. The name was changed to Masechaba (a female) after the publication of the play. This change marks an important rethinking of gender roles and a "strategic shift from the postmodern European dramaturgy to the indigenous political aesthetic of performance poetry." See: Anthony, O'Brien (2001) *Against Normalization*. London: Duke University Press. p. 104.

depicted. Under apartheid laws, plays with political import like *Gangsters* must be contained; as such dramatists had to devise means of surviving under the storm.

Gangsters is a melting pot of creative and historical materials; it is riddled with actual events, embellished to create a fictional world, with all the brutality, resilience and dashed hopes that obtains in the real world. The play historicises true events in an attempt to present a narrative from the lens of both the oppressor and oppressed. Its experimental collaborative playmaking process allowed it to reach the stage – and eventually publishing house – at a time when plays of its nature where scuttled at birth. Maponya's other post-Soweto black dramas, such as *Jika* (1986) and *Hungry Earth* (1979), also reached the stage because they were unscripted in their early runs. These plays are known for their anti-establishment leaning; and unlike other black (generally non-white) playwrights and troupes, such as the Serpent Players, Maponya did not seek the support and training of white theatre practitioners such as Fugard and Simon – which was the normal practice of the day. This paper attempts to assess the historicity of the events in the play and circumstances of its staging. It also seeks to examine the drama's explorations of blame, tagging, action and backlash, in view of the context (apartheid regime) which made them possible. The apartheid regime (1948-1993) was built on the principle of segregation on the basis of race.

2. Foregrounding

Segregation was an old practice in South Africa. It was, at first, not restricted to whites versus blacks. From the 1880s to 1890s even the *Uitlanders* (referring to English-speaking, German, Yiddish, Cantonese, and Gujurati foreigners) were refused 'citizenship' for obvious economic and political reasons by the South African government led by Paul Kruger (Kruger 2013: 9). Although the situation changed over time, the race relations remained tensed. Apartheid is a Dutch and Afrikaans word meaning 'apart-ness'. It was imposed in 1948 with the parliamentary ascendency of the Nationalist Party, led by D.F. Malan. It is a legal form of racial segregation that was entrenched in the social, political and economic structures of the state from 1948 to 1993, although racial discrimination was practiced by British colonisers in South Africa since 1795 (MacConachie, Zarrilli, Williams, and Sorgenfrei 2010). The British created a separatist system in the nineteenth-century that restricted residence and free movement of the races thus designating certain areas for whites, coloureds, and blacks. The black people were required to strictly observe this imperial mapping by carrying a pass card at all times. And eventually, all non-whites[2] were stripped of legal rights to vote, to own land, to practice certain professions, and other basic human rights (MacConachie et al 2010). These policies were strengthened in 1948 and justified in the name of apartheid, an imposed system of separate development and opportunities between the racial groups in the country.

As a race-based system, apartheid was legalised through legislations on pretext of defending the west from communism (Ngeokovane 1989). Numerous acts and policies were formulated, promulgated, and imposed in order to maintain the white privileged status quo and to control race relations. Some of these many policies included: Bantu Education Act (Act 47

[2] The country was divided along racial lines: a) *whites,* referring to all Europeans; b) *blacks,* also called Bantus; c) *coloureds,* people of mixed race; and d) *Asians*, comprising Indians, Pakistanis and Chinese

of 1953), Suppression of Communism Act (Act 24 of 1967 and 2 of 1972), Group Areas Act (Act 41 of 1957), Unlawful Organisations Act (Act 34 of 1960), and the amended Publications Act (Act 18 of 1978). Notably most of these acts from 1948 on are amendments of old separatist laws.[3] Put together, the acts empowered the regime to regulate movement and residence and contain individual dissents and mass oppositions. They also consolidated economic and social gaps in the country, drawing/maintaining a marked binary line between whites and non-whites. One of the infamous policies was the Group Areas Act of 1957, which determined residences, thus restricting races to certain locations. Blacks (at some point all non-whites), for example, were restricted to townships like Sophiatown, New Brighton, and Soweto, while the whites resided in cities like Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. Over time, townships like Sophiatown became urban enclaves and hubs of vibrant social, intellectual, and cultural activities.[4] It also served as a hotbed of anti-apartheid movements and eventually declared as a black spot under the Groups Areas Act[5] (Kruger 2013). It was a highly 'multiracial' township that was famous for poverty, unsanitary condition, insecurity, rebellion and overcrowding (Kruger 2005). This somewhat accounted for the forced removal of its residents and the demolition of its largely make-shift houses.[6] In *Boesman and Lena,* Athol Fugard re-enacts this sad forced-removal. It is also depicted in the literary works of Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, and Nadine Gordimer, and in Todd Matshikiza's musicals like 'bebob' and 'king kong' (Kruger 2013).[7]

Africans (native blacks) regarded not fit for the suburbs, and so without the right papers, were also moved and contained in reserves, known later as Bantustans (Jibril 2015). These reserves at that time served as labour pools for the mainly Boer farmers and white mining executives, entrenching a capitalist system that divided the people based on their roles[8] and contributions to the state (Bello 2016). Another harsh act was the pass-law (it predates institutionalisation of apartheid), which regulated rural-urban migration and contained non-whites in designated areas. Apartheid categorised people and determined their place in the society, forcing them to carry identification cards specifying their race. It also illegalised interracial marriages, sexual and social relations across the colour bar, and segregated in the use of amenities and facilities (restrooms, swimming pools, restaurants, hospitals, theatres, and

[3] These acts included Masters and Servants Act (1856), Mines and Works Act (Act 12 of 1911), Native Affairs Act (1920), Representation of Blacks Act (Act 12 of 1936), and Electoral Laws Amendment Act (1940) (See South African History Online 2016).

[4] There were artists like Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi, political activists and communists like the famous Dr Xuma and J.B. Marks, entrepreneurs of all sorts, vibrant shebeens, city workers, outlaws and *tsotsis.*

[5] Sophiatown was slated for demolition in 1955.

[6] The forced-removal started on 9 February 1955 and lasted for over eight years. Despite international protests, roughly 60,000 non-whites were removed by intimidating armed soldiers. The exclusively white town of Triomf (Triumph) was built on the rubble remains of Sophiatown.

[7] The Publication and Entertainment Control Board (1963-93) banned the circulation of Sophiatown literature in 1966, although it was partly restored in 1986. See: Loren Kruger (2013: 103) *Imagining the Edgy City*: *Writing, Performing and Building Johannesburg*. New York: Oxford University Press. p. 60-1.

[8] In apartheid South Africa, roles were not entirely cut-off from race/colour. In fact, it was the defining factor. There were two obvious classes, the *bourgeois* (mostly whites; there were poor whites) and *proletariat* (blacks). There were sub-classes in between.

schools), all captured by one state act or the other (Walder 2012). And to contain anti-apartheid activities, the government promulgated anti-communist laws to outlaw all forms of dissent, protest, and/or opposition of the regime. The draconian laws were so many that it was difficult, if not impossible, for non-whites to avoid trouble. The forced-removal of over three million people from Sophiatown as well as the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960[9] and report of human right abuse during the Soweto Uprising of 1976 are particular instances of the regime's containment system. The situation in the country reached its peak in the 1980s, forcing other nations to participate through cultural, political and economic boycotts.

Experiences of apartheid manifested both in the political and literary space. Playwrights from Herbert Dhlomo (1903-1956) to Athol Fugard and Maishe Maponya depict these experiences and legislations and their effects on the largely non-white population in the nation. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island* for example, Fugard Kani and Ntshona depict the consequences of breaking the pass-law and indulging in dissent termed anti-communist. And in *Dirty Work* and *Gangsters* Maponya examines the highhanded containment strategies of the state through the South African Security Branch. Interestingly, the dramas historicise events of this nature, problematise generalised labels and concepts and as expected in theatre present audience with religious, mythological, and military imageries.

3. History, labels and imageries

The early productions of the drama opened with the pitiful image of a hooded crucified man, which reminded the spectators of the crucifixion of Christ. This religious icon was meant to arouse emotion and stimulate critical thought. Actually, it evoked fear during the early run of the play, an effect that was well managed by the dramatist by 'stretching the moment of fright and gloom to about three minutes' (Moorosi 1997: 47). This image was also used to 'reorient the theological system, with a view to making religion relevant to the aspirations of the black people' (Kavanagh 1985: 149). The image also symbolises innocence and torture, one similar to that of Prometheus, who was staked to a rock and punished for defying the gods by giving mankind the gift of fire in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*.[10] In *Gangsters*, this image stands for the trial of Masechaba who is tortured and then murdered for speaking against the regime. In a joint experiment with Maytham,[11] Maponya narrates enacts this extrajudicial murder and demonstrates that the voice of the oppressed is so forceful that it can be heard, even in death.

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[9] About 69 unarmed protesters were killed and roughly 18,000 arrested.

[10] Prometheus (a Titan) was the god of fire in Greek mythology. Ancient Greece had many gods – with each representing different aspects of Greek life. Zeus served as the head god. The gods lived on the high mountain known as Olympus and were said to interfere in the affairs and destiny of men. The interference of these gods and the conflicts between them are captured in classical dramas such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

[11] John Maytham starred as Piet Hannekom in *Dirty Work* and as Major Whitebeard in *Gangsters* in the early performances of the plays. As a black playwright and director, Maponya defied the theatre tradition in South Africa by creating white roles, and then directing a white actor, in his plays for the first time in South Africa. The practice had been that whites like Fugard and Simon created black roles and then directed black actors in their plays. See: Shuenyane, Morakile (1984) Resistance Theatre. *The Drum.* 16 October. pp. 149–151.

Gangsters reenacts the communist activities, arrest, interrogation and controversial murder of Steve Biko[12] in detention. The play is also a reenactment of the tragic fate of the activists who also paid the ultimate prize in similar manner. Major Whitebeard's and Jonathan's (apartheid security force agents) assessments of the 'wounds' on Masechaba's body suggests that Biko's murder is still shrouded in contradictions. Masechaba (a poet-activist) is the reincarnation of Biko; her resurrection is informed by the need to listen to Biko's opposing narrative. The play represents the black peoples' best possible guess of what actually happened to Biko inside the dark and gloomy police cell. It also shares with *Catastrophe* – Beckett's drama about Havel's imprisonment in a Czech prison – the 'aim of celebrating and vindicating a writer-activist in the hands of an enemy state" (O'Brien 2001: 105). *Gangsters* however differs from Beckett's *Catastrophe* and Havel's *Mistake* in the way it utilises the South African cultural milieu, both indigenous and global, to re-negotiate and/or deconstruct notions of power and representation (O'Brien 2001).

Gangsters also deconstructs the idea of race by depicting it as a given historical contradiction 'that cannot be transcended, but must be lived through' (O'Brien 2001: 119). It uses poems as an alternative to the usual and inciting liberation songs to best convey its anti-essentialist and deconstructive intentions. This is demonstrated in the last poem (recited under the blue light) in the framing of the struggle as a non-racial (white and black, free and unfree) revolutionary action. This *play* of intention(s) can as well cover the labelling or nomenclature of a gangster. *Gangsters* also complicates the notion of crime, criminal or political, even further in its blend of issues like intent and accident. Even the TRC[13] hearings and report had to deal with these issues (Foster et al. 2005), thereby raising the question of whether one can be a perpetrator by accident. Individual or groups' subversion and state containment in history harbour this kind of problematics such that it is hard to distinguish liberation movements such as The Azanian People's Liberation Army that also carried out attacks on white civilians (Cottrell 2005) from containment settings like Vlakplaas in terms of violence.[14]

4. Theatre, apartheid shackles and backlash

Subversion and containment are recurrent themes in South African anti-apartheid literatures. Subversion here refers to the attempts to disrupt and transform an established social order and its accompanying structures of power, authority and hierarchy. Theatre had always provided a working space for this sort of practice. Shakespeare's Lord Chamberlain's Men, for example, rebelled against the British State under Queen Elizabeth who ironically was a supporter of the theatre (Greenblatt 2005). The revival of Shakespeare's *Richard II* under the sponsorship of

[12] Steve Biko was a black activist founder of the South African version of the Black Consciousness Movement.
[13] Truth Reconciliation Committee (TRC).
[14] TRC offered amnesty to "acts, omissions and offenses associated with political objectives" under (Section 251, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act no. 200 of 1993), therefore complicating the differences between subversive political activities and state containment processes. See: Don, Foster, Paul, Haupt. and Meresa de Beer (2005) *The Theatre of Violence: narratives of protagonists in the South African conflict.* Cape Town: HSRC Press. p. 6.

Gelly Meyrick[15] proved that theatre has a potential subversive power. This confirms Plato's fear in *The Republic* that poetry has the tendency to stir emotions, disrupt order and challenge authority. Subversion is innate, it appears in the arts and political spaces. The state's ability to contain this tendency is often regarded as a demonstration of absolute power.

Subversion and containment are inextricably linked. Individual subversion occurs either as a backlash or is created by the state to lure oppressed and rebellious spirits so as to effectively subdue and punish them as an example. This was the norm from time immemorial. Apartheid South Africa is not altogether different from what Montrose (1989) labels as the Tudor-Stuart states such as Britain and Ireland, who also, in many cases, created and contained subversive gestures. The parallels between the contexts are apparent. Plays such as *Gangsters* (and other prison plays) textualise a historical and political background. The play is an indictment of the police's strong-arm techniques leading to the death of the poet-activist. The murder cannot be far detached from the death of Biko under mysterious circumstances – an event that served as the political background of the play. Out of the several cases of deaths in detention during the apartheid regime, only Stephen Biko's and Stanza Bopape's were submitted for consideration during the TRC hearing; the rest (cases of nameless foot soldiers) remain uninvestigated and unknown (Foster et al. 2005: 16).

Johan van der Merwe[16] testified that, he ordered the cover-up (like Whitebeard's cover-up of the murder of Masechaba) of the death of Bopape (a *mamelodi* activist) who 'died on 12 June 1988 while electric shocks were being administered during interrogation' (Foster et al. 2005: 106). The boundary – if there was any at all – between lawful and unlawful operations carried out by both dissent activists and the regime was blurred at the time. The period of emergency (1985-1986) further complicated the already bad equation. The escalation of violence around the country forced the South African Police force (SAP) – with support from the military – to adopt overzealous containment strategies to crush dissent within or outside the ambit of the law (Johan, in Foster et al. 2005: 105). Johan maintains that the ANC and its allies' escalating unconventional war left SAP with little choice. He argues that, strong-arms methods were not part of SAP's authorised operational practice, but the operatives involved in what are termed as human right abuses were trying to curb extreme potential threats (Foster et al 2005). These varying responses, from the different sides of the struggle, show how all voices are essential for cultural analysis, including that of the oppressor or authority and the oppressed.

5. Subversion and containment in *Gangsters*

Gangsters was produced during the state of emergency, which recorded the arrests of roughly 40,000 people (mostly black people). These incessant arrests and sometimes callous murders further fuelled the resistance and campaigns in the arts and political arena for an end to the

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[15] Gelly Meyrick was an officer of the Essex household, which was a very important noble family during the Elizabethan period. See: Greenblatt, Stephen. (2005) *The Greenblatt Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell. p. 2.

[16] General Johan van der Merwe was a former divisional commander of the Northern Transvaal Security Branch in the 1980s who was one of those offered amnesty by TRC. See: Don, Foster, Paul, Haupt and Meresa, de Beer. (2005) *The Theatre of Violence: narratives of protagonists in the South African conflict.* Cape Town: HSRC Press. pp. 106.

terror in the country. As a Soweto poet-activist, Masechaba[17] symbolises the struggle and the role of artists in the campaign. Her resolve and resistance is, however, eventually contained by Whitebeard and Jonathan who – as state security agents – are required to stifle communist acts by breaking the back of any resistance in accordance with the laws of the land. Johan (in Foster et al. 2005: 118) outlines the roles of police under the apartheid regime: protect people of all race or creed, prevent ANC and other organisations from forcefully seizing the country; promote the image of the state, destabilise subversive and terrorist acts (including preventing the use of limpet mines, landmines and car bombs) and maintain law and order. Dutifully, the force carried out its cardinal duties to the letter, such that any form of resistance was regarded as a communist activity and those found guilty of it were arrested and punished.

In *Gangsters,* Masechaba's poems serve as the voice of conscience, which echoes despite the strict police warning and banning orders meant to keep the poet down. The poems are recited intermittently as expressions of the radical black principles of the day. The teachings, ideas, writings, and ideals of principal black figures such as Mandela, Biko, Sobukwe, Luthuli, and Tambo had a huge impact on the radical black minds of the period. The poems also recollect historical events, from the destruction of Sophiatown, to the Soweto Uprising and Sharpeville Massacre. They also criticise the imposition of the Bantu Education system and the methods of suppressing opposition. The poet's position on these events offers a view into the apartheid system and police operations.

In the prologue, Masechaba criticises the imperialist capitalist system that led to the death of children in the streets. She also condemns the enslavement of black workers and fathers "who die digging the gold they will never smell" (78), thus offering a victim account of the system and its effects on black life. Similarly, she recollects the gradual destruction of Sophiatown – a forced removal that led to the sad displacement of many non-white families: "Sophiatown is no more" and "Gugulethu is no longer ours" (78). Gugulethu was a black township and a hub of cultural activities and crime in Cape Town.[18] Her poems depict the gloomy pictures of the many black protesters "buried in Sharpeville" (78). Masechaba dwells on this tragic, although avoidable, incident and criticises the atrocities committed by the state's security police:

> MASECHABA. In Sharpeville again
> I see mothers kneeling beside bodies
> Riddled with bullets
> And I mutter to myself
> The ugly brown trucks
> Drives a maneater
> Dressed in ugly brown canvas uniform. (80)

[17] In Sotho, Masechaba means mother of the nation.

[18] Gugulethu is a township on the outskirts of greater Cape Town. Like other black townships such as Langa, Nyanga and Sophiatown, its establishment (in 1958) was informed by the Group Areas Act.

There are varied accounts of this unfortunate massacre. Cottrell (2005: 6) reports that many unarmed protesters converged in front of the Sharpeville police station to protest against the imposition of the passbook, often burning their own passbooks as a mark of defiance. In turn, the police first used an aircraft to fly over the protesters, with the hope that they would scurry and disperse. Cottrell reports that neither the aircraft nor the heavily armed policemen moved the crowd. The situation remained like that until Lieutenant Colonel Pienaar showed up. Pienaar's inability to bring order led him to command the 300 policemen at his disposal to charge, later arguing that he had been unable to disperse the crowd: "I did not have any time to do that. I would have liked to" (Cottrell 2005: 8). Pienaar's claim that he did not give the order to shoot can be interpreted in two ways. First, there was a misinterpretation in the chain of command; second, the policemen showed their fear, in light of the killings of policemen and informers by dissent activists and mobs across the country.[19] While these reasons may be valid, they cannot clear the perpetrators of their crime.

Biko's (1976: 82) discussion of fear as an important determinant of the actions and inactions of the agents of the state gives weight to the latter interpretation.[20] This fear is also replicated in the mammoth crowd, and, as Masechaba states, in the black townships such as Katlehong, Huhudi and Leandra, which harbour the fear of security police dressed in "ugly brown canvas uniforms behind ugly brown trucks" (80). Masechaba believes that containment strategies are particularly effective with old folks, but cannot tame the resolve of these "young determined Azanians" (81). She criticises the trigger-happy method of the police mandated to contain and manage protests and questions the conscience of the white settlers that kill and exploit black people in the name of settlement, containment and law:

MASECHABA. You puzzle me Mister Gunslinger
To think you will be strong enough
To rid your conscience
Of the days you made our lives ugly
With torture
With blood
With massacre [...]
Are you really sure
You understand why you suppress
Our aspiration
And our dreams
Into nightmares...
Are you aware of the deeds of your settler-forebears
With their wagon-wheels
Running

[19] On 24 January 1960 (a few weeks to the Sharpeville Massacre), 9 policemen were killed at Cato Manor, Durban, by an angry mob who resisted the raid of illicit liquor. See: Robert, C. Cottrell (2005) *South Africa: a state of apartheid.* Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers. p. 8.

[20] It is maintained that this inciting article (originally written in 1971, and only appearing in 1976) led to his arrest, torture and eventual death.

And crushing
The blooming lives
Cuddled with hope
You with your brown bombers
Ugly as ever
Parading the streets
Like it is the bush. (80–81)

Masechaba criticises the white settlement process that led to the murder of several natives in order to protect the interests of the new settlers. Her narrative is not however new considering the colonial processes in other former colonies of the world. Her account (mostly through her poems) offers the usual one-eyed perspective of the white settlement and colonial process in South Africa. It is domineering at this point in the drama. Generally, the interrogation scenes offer her – or Rasechaba in the first version of the play – moments of victory over her jailers. O'Brien (2001: 115) maintains that these scenes are important for their "powerful lines" and "political effectiveness."

Masechaba's encounter with Whitebeared and Jonathan at a later point in the play introduces us to an opposing voice: that of the state (colonial) representative. The image of the crucified and hooded activist (ironically symbolising a terrorist Christ) at the beginning of the play has a binding effect on audience and generates so much sympathy for the poet such that her voice dominates that of her oppressor. Jonathan – on the other hand – is a puppet on a string, whose intermediate voice regarding the events (he is a part of) is never heard. He is torn between his conscience and playing the stooge, a position that will ensure his preservation from want at a time when survival and place within a culture largely depended on the hard choices of simply being with or against the authority. This explains why he is manipulated by Whitebeared, and why Masechaba's bitter narrative of how the whites dispossessed the blacks of their lands and shared them among themselves nearly moved him to abandon the imperialist cause.

MASECHABA. In the beginning it was you and me. The land belonged to us. We tilled it. We shared everything equally. Then came the white man with his own thoughts. He put us asunder; put us against each other and while this was going on, he fenced us around and then moved about freely declaring our land his land – no man's land. Did you not seen [sic] those boards along the road as you came from home this morning, saying: 'in front of you, behind you and all around you is a Rand Mines property?' Have you bothered to ask yourself 'where did Rand Mines get our land from? Who did he buy it from? He took it with a gun. Do you know what the white man is doing today? He is sharing every little bit of our soil equally with his own brother. (97)

Masechaba's persuasion of Jonathan would have worked if not for the financial benefit he has to reconsider. Whitebeared understands this monetary weakness and uses it to tame Jonathan. There are clear loopholes in Masechaba's wild claims. First, her claim that the lands belonged

to the blacks and was shared and tilled equally can be faulted on the grounds that ethnic tribes engaged in battles over land and authority well before the contentious white settlement. The early displacement of the San tribe (who had roamed the lands for over ten thousand years) is an apt example. Under Shaka's rule (ca. 1785-1828), the Zulus caused monumental havoc on neighbouring communities and peoples, seizing lands and displacing inhabitants. This created a sad 'refuge crisis (*mfecane*, or scattering) that destabilised areas from Mosheoshoe's Sotho kingdom to the plains of Kenya' (Kruger 2004: 248). The dominant tribes grabbed lands with spheres in the same way that they were *re*taken by the later settlers with gun. Second, but also related to the preceding one, is the claim that the white man 'put us asunder; put us against each other' (97). This is also flawed because African tribes (like many other early societies) have always fought each other over land and authority. Apartheid did not plant these seeds of division; the homeland system flows directly from that plan.

The homeland system was designed to deny political and other related rights to certain groups (mostly non-whites) inside South Africa, as well as to 'speed up the division of the country in to segregated regions, white and black' (Cottrell 2005: 92-3). Segregation was the heart of the apartheid system. South Africa was divided along racial and ethnic lines. There were marked differences educationally, politically, economically, and socially between the groups.[21] The artificial boarders in the country suggested (and unfortunately still do) not only designated areas of residence for each group, but also instituted differences in education, with the Bantu Education Act of 1953 designed to justify, institutionalise and enforce it at the schools level. It was framed to deny black people (then called Bantus) proper education, teach compliance, and instil intellectual control. Masechaba criticises these hidden motives, especially the use of education as a control mechanism.

Masechaba considers the Bantu Education system as the state's way of extending segregation to the schools, hence enforcing a separate curriculum as well as educational facilities. Black people under the regime were denied a good education, such that even missionary schools were forced to close down due to lack of government funding and support. This finally led to the boycott of the system from 1954 to 1955 and, ultimately, the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976 (Jibril 2015). The Afrikaans Medium Decree of 1974 aggravated the situation when it made it a law that Afrikaans and English should be used as the languages of instruction in schools. This led to a series of protests by the young high school pupils in Soweto (Buntman 2004). BCM activists under Biko's leadership, and other ringleaders of the resistance groups, played active part in fuelling the discontent that led to the uprising. Biko was later arrested, leading to his trial and death in 1977. It can be argued that, law is an imperative aspect of any organised society; it is the duty of any government to therefore enforce it irrespective of who is involved in breaking it or whose interest is affected in the process. In the case of apartheid legislations, however, human rights are accorded to a privileged few.

Apartheid's stance on subversion and acts of violence was unambiguous. Agitators are restrained in order to curtail further breach of the law. In Maponya's play, security agents such as Whitebeared and Jonathan are charged under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950

[21] The socio-economic aspect of this difference manifested in the provisions of social amenities and availability (or non-availability) of economic opportunities.

(amended: 1967; 1972), Terrorism Act of 1962, Criminal Law Act of 1953, and Public Safety Act of 1953 with curtailing hostility and provocation; ensuring public safety; breaking protests; and containing rebellious gestures. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1956, for example, 'permitted detention without trial for 180 days (up from the 90 days permitted in 1963)' (Kruger 2013: 96). The Suppression of Communism Act of 1967 notably 'broadened the terms of conspiracy and racial hostility further and allowed police in the special Bureau of State Security to detain suspects indefinitely without charge or notification' (Kruger 2003: 96). Masechaba's inciting poetry contravenes the racial hostility clause and is regarded by the security branch as capable of instigating rebellion and disrupting state activities. Aware of the efficacy of poetry to stir emotions and incite violent action, Whitebeard warns:

> WHITEBEARD. So what interests us is not so much the creative process as the effect that your poetry had on ordinary people: people who don't have the insight and understanding that you and I have, and therefore there can be no doubt Miss Masechaba that your poems have made a lot of people feel angry, even violent and it is my job to put a stop to that sort of thing. (85)

Whitebeard's main duty is to warn against dissent (as seen in his friendly advice to the poet), impose and maintain law and order, and repress rebellious spirits using any means necessary. He speaks for the authority in the same way that Masechaba speaks for the oppressed groups. Whitebeard and Masechaba cannot see eye-to-eye because they speak for and represent different and opposing groups. Their conflicting allegiances open up the debate as to who is to be blamed for the violence that ensues. This was the case in the country during the period of emergency. Whitebeard maintains that Masechaba's poems ridicule the Afrikaners and police force. The poems also defy the Publication Act of 1975 because of their undesirable political and inciting contents. The Act (as amended in 1978) gave censorship boards across South Africa the power to ban all questionable works and punish artists who produce anti-apartheid works. Whitebeard identifies seminal areas in the poems where Masechaba has contravened the provisions of the act:

> WHITEBEARD. Can't you see that you are inciting people to violence with your poetry. When you use lines like 'the barbed wire mentality of a good-looking Afrikaner' you are insulting the Afrikaaner people. When you write about the "trigger-happy fingers" it shouldn't surprise you when the people respond by raising their fists in the air and shouting "Amandla Ngawethu!" (87)

Whitebeard emphasises allegiance to state laws rather than to a group of people or a common cause. He speaks of the law in the same fashion that John (as Creon) in *The Island* sees it as the protector of the state. He believes that laws must exist in a civilised society, and must also be obeyed. He does not care who makes the law, or whether it is a just one or not, because his job is to enforce it (devoid of any party allegiance); and in the process defend his heritage. To defend his family – and so his race – he is prepared to go all the way: 'but Miss Masechaba, in order to protect that little boy from you and your Marxist friends, to stop your violence and

terror from changing that little boy's joy to tears, these hands will do anything [hits her with both hands], anything! And the blood will wash off very easily' (104). His cherished heritage and family are more important than the group and culture Masechaba agitates for, in the same way that his white family do not matter to the black agitators who promote violence. In these times, there were reported cases of 'attacks on black councillors, police and collaborators and the increase of necklace killing' perpetrated by the resistance forces (Foster et al. 2005; 33).[22] Aware of these potential threats, Whitebeard is willing to commit any act even if it means going outside the ambit of the law to protect his most cherished treasures of family and heritage. In the end, it is not just about the defence of the law, but also about the defence of a cherished way of life. As a father with the wherewithal to curtail violence, he goes the extra step to stop the fire from burning his hands. As Masechaba states shortly after Whitebeard's declarations, every individual, whether black or white, oppressor or oppressed, free or unfree, has equal right. She, however, condemns the way Whitebeard (symbolising the apartheid state) has used his unchecked powers to crush the hopes of one group in order to sustain the security and luxury of another. She honours the resolve of the oppressed blacks and suggests that their resistance is a natural thing – a backlash of centuries of mass murder and servitude. Maponya considers the impoverishment in the violence-ridden townships and the class structure as the main roots of the struggle and violence in the country. He believes that it occurs because a certain group is bent on suppressing another so as to maintain its hold on the wealth and affairs of the state. Masechaba thus exonerates black people from their violence and maintains that it is the draconian and stringent laws that account for the poverty and resultant violence:

> MASECHABA. I am not responsible for the creation of the squatters. I am not responsible for the starvation of millions of children because their parents have been forced into arid homelands. I did not create the humiliating laws, and I never created the racial barriers in this land. Who do you expect me to blame when life becomes unfair to a black soul? (85)

Masechaba believes that defiance is the only obvious and necessary alternative for the black people. Black artists – from the 1970s on – wrote about black experiences in the township, mines and rural migrant labour; they did not chase rats while their houses were on fire (see earlier sections on black consciousness). Masechaba symbolises those black artists who defiantly threw stones at the authorities. She chooses the resistance poetry form to protest the killings and poverty.

Achebe (1975) believes that, African writers should write about the actual colonial condition, instead of themes that do not directly affect the people. Masechaba argues that it is the lived experiences of writers that shape their perspective(s) and so determine their choice of subject, rejecting Whitebeard's suggestion as to what her poetry should be about:

[22] These series of attacks continued until the unbanning of many organisations on 2 February 1990, the release of Mandela on 11 February, and the beginnings of political negotiations. See: Don, Foster, Paul, Haupt and Meresa, de Beer. (2005) *The Theatre of Violence: narratives of protagonists in the South African conflict.* Cape Town: HSRC Press. p. 33.

> WHITEBEARD. I don't know why you choose to depress them by concentrating on the negative aspects of their life. Why don't you cheer them up by talking about the good things that surround them – by telling them of the natural beauty that surrounds them [...]
> MASECHABA. If that poet of yours lived in Alexandra he would write about the stagnant pools of water and the smell of shit filtering through the streets at night because there is no drainage system! He would write about the buckets of faeces placed in the streets at night as if the families are bragging which family eats more to shit more! (86)

Masechaba blames the state and its numerous hard-hitting laws for the dehumanisation of the blacks in the country. She also indicts and compares Botha to Hitler and argues that he should be brought to trial for his government's highest level of inhumanity to man.[23] The harsh laws directly affected blacks to the point that artists had to work underground to survive. Masechaba narrates that she was a victim of a night raid – a usual security strategy employed to track down and arrest agitators. She recounts that the raid forced her to destroy her manuscript and notes, hard evidence that could be used against her by the police. Her arrest, detention and torture reveal the desperation and insensitivity of the police. The need to contain this poet forces Whitebeard (in his view) to order Jonathan to use any means necessary: "Jonathan, will you deal with Masechaba as you deem fit and if you have to teach her that electricity has other uses than providing light you must do it" (105). The use of electric shock for interrogation appears to be a common practice in the station where the poet is to be tamed. It is similar to the interrogation style that led to the untimely death of Stanza Bopape (Foster et al. 2005: 106). Jonathan's interrogation style leads to the death of the poet (although his actions may have been intended to subdue and not murder her). The move to conceal the actual cause of death reveals that torture and coercion are an integral part of the interrogation process. It also shows that the individual's resolve is strong, such that it is hard to bend or break it.

This individual resilience is depicted in *The Island* in the prisoners' dogged resolve in the face of clear doom. This sort of prison or cell experience is also staged in Workshop '71's *Survival* and Ngema's *Asinamali.* It is a theme in plays like Robert Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons* (1960), about the execution of Thomas More in detention and in Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), which is set in Dublin's Mountjoy prison. Generally, prison plays share the common themes of captivity, violent containment, intense emotion of convicts and jailers/interrogators, unjust arrests, and suppression, which is often the real objective, despite the death of the prisoners.

Masechaba's torture and death in the gloomy police cell and the accompanied attempt to hide her actual cause of death relates it to the political background of the play – the death of Biko in a similar circumstance. Like Biko's death, Masechaba's is shrouded in secrecy and

[23] P.W. Botha, famously known as 'big crocodile,' ruled South Africa from 1978 to 1989. As the president, he authorised the imposition of many laws that contained and exploited non-whites. He also spoke against black majority rule and communism.

contradictions. The attempts by the criminal duo in the play to offer a justifiable cause of death reveals that there are different narratives to such kinds of unspeakable deeds:

> WHITEBEARD. What will you tell the court?
> JONATHAN. I will say she threw herself out of the window in an attempt to escape [...]
> WHITEBEARD. No good. The interrogation room is on the ground floor!
> JONATHAN. All right, I'll say she was on a hunger strike since we took her in
> WHITEBEARD. No! Jonathan when last did you check your record books? We gave that excuse some time ago
> JONATHAN. [still panicking]. How about saying she hanged herself with her gown-strap, that's right! [excited]. Suicide!
> WHITEBEARD. Not convincing. There's nothing in the cell to hang herself from!
> JONATHAN. [a bit confused]. She slipped on a piece of soap..!
> WHITEBEARD. You can't fool the public with that one again! (108)

The different crime narratives; reference to the "pathologist" who will be invited to examine and manipulate the cause of the poet's death; and the use of "calamine" to conceal all visible wounds expose the conspiracy associated with the death of the poet-activist, and by extension that of Biko (110). As a woman, Masechaba's devotion to the cause appears atypical: she refuses to bend despite threats, the banning order, and imminent doom. She states: 'yes, they can ban me here but they won't ban the spirit of the nation. For as long as these millions of people are still thirsty the march will continue. "I respect the convictions of my people and they respect my beliefs. I will help them carry the cross" (96). As the outspoken spokesperson of the black resistance, like the dramatist himself, she defies the regime despite humiliation and torture.

Masechaba's resolve actually gets stronger with the interrogations. She refuses to give in or reveal the meaning of the inscription (LMA) as scribbled down in one of her books that was found with four terrorists, alongside AK47s, scorpion and limpet mines, T5s and T7s and other deadly "instruments of terror that were going to sow discord and violence" among the people (102). She survives the series of interrogations and torture, such that even in death her poetry echoes and lives after her. Her ardent resolve to carry the cross all the way for the sake of her people demonstrates that there are Azanians like her who cannot be restrained or silenced by the four walls of the interrogation rooms. John and Winston in *The Island* also display this kind of conviction by refusing to be contained by the walls of Robben Island. But while John and Winston protest, Masechaba and the comrades in *Jika* resist.

Resistance and conviction are central in *Gangsters* in the way Masechaba (like Maponya and Biko) defies all the threats to her life for a cause in which she zealously believes. Maponya thus shows himself a devoted resistance poet. There are many parallels between this character and himself: they both deliver their poems in public; Maponya acted in the play's early run as Rasechaba (then a male poet), establishing the obvious connection between his role as a poet and that of his character. Masechaba (or Rasechaba) therefore echoes not just Biko but also

Maponya himself. The playwright, with critical input from Maytham, served as the play's conduit and creative agent. As observed earlier, Masechaba's poems are creatively utilised to replace the liberation songs used in *The Hungry Earth*. These poems are, however, distant from the intended audience of the play, who were used to the awakening songs that formed an integral part of the resistance against apartheid. The township audiences were generally used to Kentian-type musicals before the rise of artists like Maponya who brought liberation songs into their performances.

Gangsters clearly had a limited impact because it was removed from the audience it intended to conscientise and mobilise. Its early restriction to the Laager section of the Market Theatre contributed to limiting its outreach. The first performance of Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in Nairobi also had similar limits, but in this case because of the play's use of performance techniques with which the target peasant audiences could not really identify – or even understand. In the end, these two plays were taken away from the people they should have rallied. However, *Gangsters* has a more literary footing compared to Maponya's other plays; its use of poetry makes it more literary than, say, *Umongikazi*. Literary language is more condensed, drawn out and telescoped than ordinary language. It helps ensure the quality of a work and its status as art. The poems in *Gangsters* are literary, but are also strategically placed to serve a resistance purpose.

Poetry is used in *Gangsters* as a rallying devise that speaks across the spectrum: mobilises the proletariat and lambasts the agents (and stooges) of the South African security force such as Jonathan, who doubles as a spy and agent. Blacks like him were used to monitor excesses and curb subversion and violence before they erupted. As an insider, he is an evident threat to the individual and collective struggle. Jonathan is turned against himself, and used to carry out dirty jobs like that of torturing the poet to death. His conscience is heavy; but he is willing to live with the scar as long as he can meet his financial obligations. The individualistic quest for survival placed many black people in such positions. Jonathan argues that he is "doing a job like any other person who wakes up in the morning to go to work for a white man in town. On Friday when that person gets his salary I also get my salary" (88). His role – pejorative as it is – does not differ altogether from that of other subservient blacks who worked as labourers and miners, as they all ultimately supported the capitalist system that subjugated them. Sycophancy and individual survival were common among many blacks who demeaned themselves because they needed a pay-package.

Masechaba critises this individualist motive as replicated in the black associations that benefit from the system: the "cheese and wine drinkers" (93) of the struggle who betray the cause by selling their brothers out. Jonathan speaks of how the groups feed on the people and the black liberation campaign. These masked black saboteurs and sell-outs are not really different from the gangsters and rogues that the play condemns. The semi-darkness which falls on the uncrowned villains, Jonathan and Whitebeard, implies that what remains of them is a faint image of their humanity; but they are not altogether in total darkness. Their shadows, one that the audience sees onstage – or imagines when reading the play – is only a reflection or a copy rather than their complete image. *Gangsters* confirms that there are different *selves* and sides to one's humanity – a multiplicity of character, shadows, and images. The contradictory images of Jonathan and Whitebeard (the play's real gangsters) raise the fundamental question

of whether we are truly our names and identities or mere masks – a point highlighted in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead.*

The guilt that Jonathan carries is heavy, perhaps heavier than the cross the poet shoulders. He seems cruel but the guilt of the torture and murder sticks and haunts him. He uses the blanket and hood to cover the body and head of his victim in a bid to conceal the murder, and is quick to cover it again after Whitebeard's examination. This cover-up trails the whole process; it is fictional as well as historical. Jonathan's act in a way suggests that his sanity and conscience are only misplaced and not absolutely lost. As a black man and member of an oppressed class, he is also trying to manage the system although he has regrettably transformed along the way. The nomenclature of gangsters and rogues is so loose and encompassing that it covers the *tsotsis* and other unmasked black stooges who turned against their brothers and violated their own people. As products of the system, the *tsotsis* practically survived by defying the laws and serving as a buffer between the contending groups of oppressor and oppressed.

Whitebeard's warning and personal declaration also mean that the gangster label is open to *re*negotiation. It seems that he is forced to employ coercion as a last resort so as to cow the poet into submission. The friendly chat and his humble plea to the poet to desist from defying the law by inciting the people with her poetry demonstrate that he is willing to operate within the dictates of human law; the banning order (for the most part) is geared at keeping the poet down and out of trouble. His initial reaction upon seeing the dead body of the poet laid on the slab portrays the other side of his humanity. His mask falls off, exposing his softer human nature, although he is quick to force it back on in order to find a way to cover the cause of the extrajudicial murder. Hence, Jonathan and Whitebeard's characters and actions are negotiable and amenable to different interpretations since the narrative itself is never given from only one point of view. The use of the word gangsters to refer to Jonathan and Whitebeard cannot therefore be safely restricted. *Gangsters* ends with salient contradictory statements, expressed in the dead poet's wish that her murderers will somehow find sanity and understand her source of inspiration and conviction:

> They would seek me out to pray together
> At the altar
> For they would have come to realise
> That I was against their own destruction
> And clung frantically
> On the frail hope
> That they would be brought to sanity. (111)

7. Conclusion

Masechaba's voice in death is as forceful, inspiring, and touching as when she is alive. She achieves transcendence over restriction, threats and death. And (like the playwright) she resists all odds that may lead her to self-censorship, or to limit the radical and inciting content of her poems. The running theme in the poems of *Gangsters* (as with Maponya's other plays) is the strength of conviction and the advocacy for resistance at the individual and collective levels.

This theme runs through most black plays of the 1970s and later. Individual will was vital to the success of the struggle.

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