

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Disillusionment in Vonani Bila's Political Poetry

Kazeem Adebisi-Adelabu*

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Abstract:

With the transition to multiracial democracy in 1994, South Africans, especially non-whites, had looked forward to a new era of social equality, economic justice, and political liberation. This sensibility gave birth to what a critic once described as a “honeymoon literature” in the country. Not long after the emergence of this kind of literature emerged another, which resonates with the political consciousness of social injustice and oppression of the apartheid era and the disenchantment noticeable in the literature of post-independence sub-Saharan up north. This article examines the representation of disillusionment in the poetry of Vonani Bila, a notable political poet of the post-apartheid era. Using Frantz Fanon's theoretical insights about post-Independence elites, aptly described as the national bourgeoisie, I examine purposively selected political poems in *Handsome Jita*, a collection of the poet's select works, to show, firstly, that social injustice is at the root of disillusionment with multiracial democracy in South Africa. Secondly, I show that the social injustice in the new South Africa is an issue of class, rather than race. I also call attention to the similarity between this development and what obtains in sub-Saharan countries up north not long after their independence.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Post-apartheid poetry, Bourgeoisie, Political elites, Vonani Bila

Introduction

Like it was in other parts of Africa in the late 1950s and the early 1960s when political independence was obtained from colonial rule, during the transition years black South Africans had looked forward to a new era of freedom and prosperity in the imminent post-apartheid years. Expectations were high that the proscription of apartheid would usher in an era of social justice, racial parity, equal opportunities, political inclusion, and a general atmosphere of better prospects in the imminent multiracial democracy. In a seeming resolve to meet these expectations, the new government of national unity under the ANC embarked on

* Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Ibadan, aka.adebiyi@gmail.com

policies targeted at ensuring social justice and economic empowerment of the hitherto marginalised groups in the country. Some of these included Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and a new constitution that guarantees the rights of minority groups, among others.

In spite of these and similar initiatives, few years into the multiracial democracy, disillusionment and disenchantment steadily began to set in; just like, according to Obiechina, it happened in post-Independence sub-Saharan African countries up north, “where the new political class proved unequal to the challenge of nation-building” (1990: 121) after independence. The ensuing disenchantment among the underprivileged South Africans in the new era, and the difference between the material conditions of the rich and the poor have been widely commented upon by historians, sociologists, political scientists, developmental economists and so on. Is it then possible, like it was in other parts of Africa, that the ensuing disillusionment is a consequence of the failure of the political class to rise to the challenge of nation-building?

Writing in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon identifies four factors which he considered as responsible for the tragedy of former colonies in their quest for nationhood and development after independence. These include the unpreparedness of the elite, the disconnection between the elite and the masses, as well as apathy and cowardice on the part of the elite. He goes on to articulate these as “the incapacity” (2004: 97) of the emergent bourgeoisie in the newly independent nations. Like in the former colonies, black South Africans were under *de facto* internal colonialism until 1994. Again, like in the former colonies, the emergent leaders of the new nation largely consist of educated elites who fit the profile of the emergent “national bourgeoisie” (2004: 97) which Fanon speaks so extensively and accusatory about.

For Fanon, these elites have the psychology of a businessman; in fact, they are middlemen, rather than leaders who should be interested in production, invention and creation. Although he admits that the elites were excluded from running the economies of their countries during the colonial era, Fanon still wonders why they cannot give free expression to their inborn geniuses after assuming the leadership of their countries. By this reflection, he places the buck of success or failure of the new nations squarely at the leaders’ table. In congruence with Fanon’s position, Patrick Bond implicates the failure of the ANC leadership to fully implement the RDP, as originally conceived, as partly responsible for the inability of post-apartheid government to deliver on its promises and mitigate the adversity in which apartheid left the majority of South Africans. Bond further argues that the non-adoption of the progressive

section of the RDP white paper, as well as the gradual replacement of the meats of the programme with neoliberal ideas and values, would prove the undoing of the great dreams held out to people's delight during the campaigns for the 1994 election. Thus, the RDP, according to Bond (2000), assumes the moniker "Rumours, Dreams and Promises", courtesy of Gatsha Buthelezi's wit. In short, the programme, like many others, eventually turned out to be empty promises.

Other scholars, such as Barchiesi (2011), Marais (2011) and Desai (2002) have also commented on the unsatisfactory state of affairs of the post-apartheid era. Barchiesi, for instance, has noted that part of the cause of such a state of affairs is the failure to deliver on the promise to redistribute land for the benefit of the black majority. He also notes that the arable land given to blacks, which is just three percent of the land as of 2011, was given to commercial farmers, thereby entrenching the landlessness of the peasants. This is in addition to the commodification of workers' lives, as well as the disappointment of the hope of "inclusive South Africanism" (2011: 34). Marais, and Desai, among other things, have commented particularly on the prevalence of poverty among Blacks and Indians respectively. The concerns of these scholars have also found corresponding creative explorations in the versification of poets of the post-apartheid era, especially those who cultivate political themes.

With a view to underscoring the role of the political elites in the underdevelopment of the post-colonies, and the ensuing disappointment of the masses, Fanon informs us that the bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries is not only a bourgeois in spirit, but one that is "an acquisitive, voracious and ambitious petty caste" (2004: 119). The class lacks credibility, inventiveness and managerial skills capable of truly creating a real bourgeois society with all the economic and industrial trappings traditionally associated with such a society. In other words, the elite in the post-Independence formation simply positions itself as an opportunist. Fanon would go on to later compare this emergent bourgeoisie with metropolitan bourgeoisie from which it had received "negative and decadent" (2004:101) mentalities. Unlike, the metropolitan bourgeoisie who has sufficiently developed a capital base and technical skills enough to sustain its hegemony without direct or brute deployment of power, the national bourgeoisie often relies on brute power to repress dissension from the masses.

It is therefore not surprising that Fanon finds the emergent bourgeoisie not only culpable in the betrayal of the expectations from independence due to a lack of economic power or technical skills, but also because of its abuse of political power. Politically, the bourgeoisie is inept. Rather than rally the people towards common goals of development and national dignity, the bourgeoisie throws up a leadership who sees itself essentially as the trustee of other members of its class,

locally and internationally. In short, it evolves a bourgeois dictatorship whereby foreign capitalists are befriended for political security, where interests of a few are catered for, while the vast majority of the people are abandoned to misery. Inexorably, alienation, frustration and disillusionment follow on the part of the majority who had given their total loyalty to the elite in the days of liberation struggle.

If, as Nkosi once wrote, “South Africa[ns]...were *saved* from the emergence of a Black Bourgeoisie by the levelling of Apartheid” (1979: 45), could it then imply that with the demise of that political order, we should not be surprised by the emergence of a national bourgeoisie in South Africa. If so, then what does the political successors after apartheid do or fail to do to validate or void Nkosi’s observation? And, what are the consequences of their actions and inactions?

In the prognostications about the direction of South African literature after apartheid, Mkhize, while agreeing with Mzamane (1996) about the possible emergence of “honeymoon literature”, points out that such a literature “could, depending on the performance of the government, soon be superseded by a literature of disillusionment” (Mkhize, 2001: 176). This has turned out prophetic, and Bila’s poetry is one of the many examples that bear this out. While the gesture towards disillusionment in his poetry has been tangentially noted by critics such as Sole (1996) and Raditlhalo (1991), I am interested in extending the discourse around the subject of disillusionment in Bila’s poetry to its link with continued social injustice, and how it resonates with that of post-Independence literature of sub-Saharan Africa up north. In my analytic thrust, I draw theoretical insights from Fanon’s conception of the role of post-Independence elites, as national bourgeoisie, in the socio-economic disenfranchisement of the masses, as enunciated above.

Politics and Poetry in South African Literature

Alongside Lesego Rampolokeng, Karen Press, Seithlamo Motsapi and so on, Vonani Bila has been identified by Sole as one of those South African poets who do not share the dogma that political poetry ended with apartheid. In an early literary reconnaissance of the poetic landscape of post-apartheid poetry, Sole notes that most of the emerging poets “wish to combine socio-political commitment with a concern for appropriate poetic style” (2014: 25), and that even the least political among them realize that “the realities of contemporary South Africa are too complex to allow for a retreat into either a blinkered public, or private, poetry” (2014: 25). Like Sole, Horwitz (2014) has equally noted the prevalence of political themes in post-apartheid poetry and goes further to illustrate how it manifests in form of explorations of inequality, social injustice, discrimination, corruption, and so on.

The place of politics and the controversies surrounding the same in South African literature date back to the apartheid era. Then, to foreground politics and marginalise aesthetics was to fulfil the historical mission imposed on writers by an environment overdetermined by politics. To privilege aesthetics in the vocation of writing was to invite political censure for insensitivity and extravagant luxury. At least, this was the case among most black and liberal white writers and critics. Thus, while liberal white writing was generally and politically sympathetic to the oppressed black majority, black writing generally and consciously cultivated political themes, mounting protest and resistance, celebrating blackness, or excoriating apartheid. This obsession with politics would inevitably incite serious speculations about the fate of South African literature in the 1990s as the country steadily moved towards the proscription of the apartheid.

Albie Sachs has been widely credited with re-igniting the debate over the relationship between politics and culture in post-apartheid South Africa. He had expressed the view that culture should no longer be deployed or seen as a weapon of political struggle shortly before the end of apartheid, as this undermines the artistry of works of art. Critical voices that responded to Sachs' view included Nixon (1997), Ndebele (1997), Brink (1996), Chapman (2009), and Sole (2008), among others. While Nixon believes that the shifts on the political landscape "have cast doubt on the writer's social status, public role, motivation, and imaginative focus" (1997: 640), and wonders how writers would adjust, others offer ideas on what they think would or should be the trajectories of the new literature, Ndebele recommends a shift from the spectacular to the ordinary, Brink looks forward to engagement with history and memory.

Contrary to Nixon's gloomy picture, South African writers have not only adjusted, their motivation and imaginative focus have improved both in quality and quantity. Many writings have confirmed Brink's prognosis. However, while Ndebele's recommendation has not gone unheeded, some writers continue to explore the spectacular and the political, which could have informed Chapman's insistence that it would be difficult to "separate literary discussion from a social referent when political events have attained the dimension of public narratives" (2009: 320).

As Sole (1996; 2014) already noted, Bila is clearly one of the political poets. But, if apartheid's injustice and oppressive mechanism justifiably provoked political art, its dislodgment ought to naturally engender a different kind of art. A little familiarity with post-apartheid milieu however reveals that while the perpetrators of the injustices and oppression of the past, which largely provoked political art, are no longer in charge, some of the legacies of injustice and oppression remain. As

this inexorably finds its way into emergent arts of the new era, I find Bila's copious thematization of the political inviting of critical interest.

Social Injustice and Disillusionment in *Handsome Jita*

I begin the analytical uptake with the poem "Comrade, Don't We Delude Ourselves?" In the poem, Bila takes on many issues, such as unofficial racism, feigned reconciliation, amnesty problematics, insensitive leadership, and socio-economic injustice. The title of the poem alludes to the *Fanonian* observation that regardless of how much the bourgeoisie try to prove it, "the masses never manage to delude themselves" (2004: 114). However, Bila's rhetorical question here does not endorse Fanon, it actually challenges his observation within the context of South African post-apartheid realities. While Fanon believes that the masses, given their miserable conditions after liberation, are never deceived by the glib speeches and nominal independence obtained by their political leaders on behalf of the people, Bila's tone suggests that South Africans are taken in by their post-apartheid leaders' pretensions. His rhetorical question appears more like a sneer at a people who still consider their leaders worthy of trust. For a poem written just about a decade after apartheid, it is plausible to claim that Bila is impatient with the new leaders of the country. Yet, it is clear that seeds of disillusionment and frustration are already being sowed as early as this period of post-apartheid era. Ostensibly frustrated by the realities or the challenges that come with the post-liberation era, the poet-persona asks:

Comrades, Don't We Delude Ourselves?
Azania bleeds and groans and moans
The wounds of liberation-betrayal gush and gape
TRC is but a travelling theatre
For Apartheid lunatics, mavericks, demagogues:
I tell you, they swim in millions and billions.
My mother, a farmworker,
My father, a mineworker –
Azania, Azania, will justice ever be done? (Bila, 2007: 25).

In these lines, the agonised condition of the masses in South Africa is depicted. For the poet, the pain of betrayal by the emergent bourgeoisie keeps worsening. The consonance in the choice of groans and moans, as well as the alliterative "gush and gape" actually adds no musicality to a poem that indeed lacks lyricism. The new elites have cornered the commonwealth of the country for selfish ends, confirming Rita Barnard's view that "South Africa has not proven immune to the troubles of other African post-colonies" (653). Whereas the injustice of apartheid past was exclusively rooted in racialism, the current one is rooted in capital might. Pursuing the theme of injustice further, Bila dismisses the TRC as a sheer entertainment. He seems to align with the

critics of the project who see it as one that negates the principle of natural justice, and intentionally designed to the advantage of perpetrators of apartheid's atrocities and injustices. It has been argued that during the negotiations to multiracial democracy, black leaders had conceded too much to their white counterparts. This development led the commoners and powerless victims of apartheid's injustice with a further sense of injustice in the post-apartheid era. It is apparently in frustration with the TRC's injustice, as well as the continued enjoyment of the privileges that apartheid granted its apologists and ideologues even after apartheid, that the poet resorts to invective and name-calling when he compares their stinking wealth with the plight of his people who are landless and work as labourers. While the rhetorical question that serves as both the title and refrain in the poem adumbrates the falsity of hope hitherto kept by the people, it particularly underscores the poet's indignation, an affect he also seems to be interested in provoking in his audience. Indeed, Bila's "Comrades, Don't We Delude Ourselves?" speaks to a rage underwritten by a sense of injustice and despair in the post-apartheid era.

In the same poem, the reader's attention is also called to how neoliberalism has trumped egalitarianism that many had anticipated of the post-apartheid era. Bila notes:

Corporatism swells on red mother earth,
 Pacts between elites are confused as rdp
 E- e, a hi swona!
 It's new colonialism.
 It's pure capitalism we abhor
 Haves always climb bread and butter ladder,
 Havenots, ek tel djou:
 Mphe-mphe ya lapisa (Bila, 2007: 28)

"Corporatism" here is a moniker for the neoliberal policies of the successive post-apartheid administrations, where global capital, by subterfuge and pressure, has been able to seize initiatives from the ANC-led governments since 1994. According to Bond, since Mandela years, "generous awards to corporations at the expense of people in need" (2000: 177) have been noted. This not only fosters and encourages class bias in the society, it further deepens poverty among the poor. To be certain, the poet's idea of "pacts between elites" also speaks to what Bond, as cited much earlier, calls "intra-elite economic deal" (2000: 145). In what comes across as a humour later in the in the following lines of the stanza, the poet suggests that what South Africans call rdp (an acronym for Reconstruction Development Programme, a government initiative) is perhaps not "pacts between elites" but just new colonialism. New colonialism is often regarded as the final nadir of postcolonial nations. Perhaps the poet implies that South Africa is at the last stage of imperialism, as Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian pan African,

prognosticated about coloniality. The humour assumes a dark hue when he declares that, after all, it is not colonialism that people dislike, but capitalism. This humour, to be sure, recalls the imagery of “Chichidodo” in Armah’s classic about post-Independence disillusionment in Ghana. Chichidodo is a bird that hates excrement with passion but ironically feeds on maggots.

Whereas it is apparent that Bila’s emotion is distanced from rage in the lines just explicated above, I like to insist that this is uncommon in his political poetry. In fact, in the last two lines of the stanza under review, the poet asks repeatedly, “Comrades, how long? / How long?”. If these questions were unclipped, or fully realised as “For how long do we continue to deceive ourselves?”, then it would become clear that the humour is a morbid one. Such a question clearly does not suggest that the poet is in a light-hearted mood. He is quite angry with the state of affairs in his country.

As part of the poem’s formal aesthetics, Bila’s use of code-mixing and code-switching in the lines above excerpt invites interest. The use of this linguistic tropes has been noted as metonymic of *rainbowism* in post-apartheid literature by Adebisi (2014). However, in this context, it signals some kind of ideological identity. It suggests an attempt by the poet to identify with the downtrodden black folks. Not only are the expressions in the African languages directed at poor black South Africans, they also comment on their abjection. Also, in an eclectic deployment of form, using metaphor, synecdoche, antithesis, and contrast, the poet further juxtaposes the plight of the poor in the following imagery:

Poverty grinds the poor in the bundus of Elim,
 Bare-skinned children have nothing on their mouths,
 Victims always get a raw deal in this world,
 Fat cheques, perks and sex is for leaders -
 Them and their first world comfort in third world Africa – (Bila, 2007: 25)

With the metaphor of grind, the excruciating nature of the poverty in which the underprivileged majority find themselves is exposed. We see a mental picture of malnourished children evoked here, refracting Liebbrandt et al’s view that after the collapse of apartheid, specifically between 1993 and 2008, “poverty incidence barely changed in rural areas, while it increased in urban areas” (2011: 37). Similarly, Barchiesi has noted that while African urban population suffer joblessness, “low wage informal occupations are for poor rural black population” (2011: 75). The poet feels so strongly about the situation that he employs invectives to attack the privileged class and their wealth. He rages: “the apartheid lunatics, mavericks, damagogues, / I tell you, they swim in the millions and billions” (Bila, 2007: 25), and wonders, “will

justice ever be done?" (Bila, 2007: 25). The rage, which underlines the poet's versification here easily demonstrates a sense of frustration. However, by isolating apartheid apologists only for his attack, Bila's sense of injustice becomes questionable. To blame apartheid for post-apartheid realities is certainly arguable. As I have observed earlier on, with blacks at the commanding heights of decision making in the new order, this would be difficult to argue. Yet, if one recalls the capacity and the influence of global capital, especially Bond's reminder of its compromising influence in the negotiation of the terms of transition to multiracial democracy in South Africa, Bila's sense of frustration may not be totally without basis.

Again, the last line of the excerpt above not only hints at a new order – classism – which has taken over the post-apartheid social landscape, it also recalls former President Thabo Mbeki's dichotomous characterisation of the country into First and Second Economies. It is noteworthy that since capital, but not race, is the sole consideration in belongingness or not to either of the economies, the terms become mere euphemisms for class stratification. In other words, Bila, whose sympathy is obviously with the poor, invokes the notion of the first world and the third world to underscore the gulf between the living conditions of post-apartheid elites that cut across racial divides, and the masses who wallow in penury.

The poet also laments the continued exploitation of his people. Rather than abate, exploitation exacerbates after the ascension of majority rule. The poet-persona remonstrates:

Sour exploitation sky rocketing,
 Black children used as spray beacons on treacherous white
 farms,
 You die on the farmland, who bothers?
 Your life is bought like the land settlers stole.
 India shops pay peanuts. – They are here for business broer!
 Land issue a bone of contention,
 But who'll afford the expensive land on the market?
 Yet I can't understand why the government buys its own land
 (Bila, 2007: 25)

In these lines, while the majority of blacks are depicted as being at the receiving end of social injustice and economic exploitation in the new era, the impression is also created that whites and Indians are exclusive perpetrators of the same. This perspective ignores the reality that blacks dominate the political space where decisions that impact socio-economic realities are made. These are blacks who, together with other members of the political class, are said to get "Fat cheques, perks and sex" (Bila, 2007: 25). In other words, the top echelon of the apartheid political class, in cahoots with the *nouveau riche* and *comprador* black

elites in politics and business, are responsible for the betrayal of the hopes of the masses of South Africans in the post-apartheid era. The image of such elites recalls leadership figures in other post-colonial African societies, as exemplified in Achebe's (1966) *A Man of the People*. In the novel, there is Chief Nanga, a symbol of the *nouveau riche* and politically corrupt elites who supplanted former colonial masters. It is also noteworthy that the last two lines of the excerpt above speaks again to the frustration of the poet over the land redistribution policy of the ANC government. Since the vast land possessed by whites were forcefully taken originally, people had expected that the new government would use its power to reclaim the land and redistribute the same to all. Again, this expectation was betrayed by the compromise already negotiated between the last apartheid regime and the liberation leaders. In the *Fanonian* prognosis regarding the post-Independence era of underdeveloped countries, the national bourgeoisie would always rely on the Western bourgeoisie to advance its interest. He also notes that the national bourgeoisie would compromise the national interest for selfish reasons or due to cowardice at critical moments.

"Dennis on the March" is primarily Bila's paean to the heroic exploits of the renowned activist-poet Dennis Brutus in the liberation struggle, as well as his subsequent fight against social injustice and bad governance after apartheid. The poem was written to commemorate the eightieth birthday of the literary giant. Somehow, Bila's disappointment and bitterness about the socio-economic realities of his country sneaks into his poetic celebration of the literary icon. From encomiums on the exploits of the famous poet in the fight against apartheid, the poet moves progressively to praise Brutus's activism in the post-apartheid era, and then to his own frustration with the new freedom. He writes:

even today
at the age of eighty
you still march
in the streets of jo'burg
feet firm on the ground
though in the smothering sun
of squeezed dreams
you march with the hungry patriots
whose harvest of freedom
is but dust (Bila, 2007: 40-41)

The second half of this excerpt clearly shows a reality in dissonance with the expectations of the generality of the people. When the poet-persona talks of "the smothering sun of squeezed dreams" (Bila, 2007: 41), there is more to the alliterative versification. Not only have people's dreams of a better life become unrealised in the new era, the idea of being "squeezed" suggests a deliberate dissipation of the

opportunities for their fulfilment. The sun, which ordinarily symbolises a life-giving force and source of warmth, is here presented as a destructive agent, just like leaders who are characterised as “gucci socialist / with treacherous sickness / ... who now disown their people / ravaged by throbbing pain” (Bila, 2007: 41). This characterisation of post-apartheid elites is reminiscent of the portrayal of people like Koomson, the protagonist’s friend in Armah’s (1969) *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Koomson, one of the ministers of post-Independence Ghana depicted in the novel, goes after the gleam and luxury of political privilege. Becoming not only stinking rich, he also symbolises the opulence and extravagance that inevitably plunged Ghana into economic woes and left most citizens disillusioned and frustrated shortly after independence. These elites, who constitute the national bourgeoisie, in fidelity to Fanon’s conception, use the masses to attain power, and thereafter ask them to withdraw to the backstage. The idea of “gucci socialist” is an oxymoronic figuration that unmistakably ridicules the Socialist pretensions of self-professed Communists and Marxist coterie of the struggle years, who are now the new leaders of the country. “Gucci” is a brand name that symbolises the extravagance typically associated with Capitalist materialism, whereas socialism instructs in frugal deployments of needs. Yoking the two lexical items together therefore appears intended to foreground not just an inherent contradiction but also the hypocrisy of the emergent national bourgeoisie who place class interest above common interest.

The poet’s bitterness over the disappointing post-apartheid realities is also limned in the material and medical plights of the rural dwellers depicted in the poem. The poet writes:

though Mandela is free
rivers of typhoid
& cholera flow freely
& consume the poor of the world
blade-sharp revolutionary
you march in step
alongside the landless peasants
the evicted & the unemployed (Bila, 2007: 42)

To the poet, the attainment of freedom has not brought about desired changes. On the contrary, it has brought greater pain and misery to the rural folk. The hope of the peasants to re-gain their long-lost land is turned into illusion, while the number of eviction victims and the unemployed soars. As of the fifth year into ANC’s administration, Bond (2000) had noted that only one out of the 30% of land targeted for redistribution was actually distributed. These are the new realities of the majority who had patiently looked forward to a new era of bliss. The picture painted here is precisely of what Cronin describes as South

African poets’ “grappling with the shortfall between post-apartheid aspirations and actual realities on the ground” (2003: 12). The imagery evoked by “rivers of typhoid / & cholera” equally recalls the scatological images of stench from excrement, mucous, phlegm, saliva drips, overflowing waste dumps and other kinds of filth that saturate the pages of Armah’s classic novel of disillusionment.

In a direct yet symbolic engagement with the post-apartheid political class, Bila addresses South African president in “Mr President, Let the Babies Die”. In a satire that thrives on a combination of irony, metaphor, invective and scatological imagery, the poet excoriates members of the political class as insensitive, inept, self-centred, and disappointing. He begins with parliamentarians who are no longer interested in making laws to lift people out of penury, but instead sleep during legislative sessions. In a bitter irony, he goes on to ask protesters and the complaining public to not therefore trouble Mr President who “has an important meeting in Washington DC” (Bila, 2007: 37). Instead of giving the President trouble, they should buy him a private jet and houses in cities across the world, while poor women can sell their “breasts and thighs for a living” (Bila, 2007: 38). The sharp contrast between the life of the political elites and the plight of the people depicted in the poem evokes an image of irresponsible and profligate leadership that is also reminiscent of post-Independence Ugandan disillusionment depicted by Henry Barlow in the poem “Building the Nation”. In his poem, Barlow juxtaposes the disappointment of the masses through the symbolism of a diligent driver, and an irresponsible and inept permanent secretary, who tells the driver that he was building the nation at a luncheon party where he was actually wining, dining and having small talks. The presentations of Mr President and the permanent secretary in Bila’s and Barlow’s respective poems perfectly aligns with the *Fanonian* conception of the national bourgeoisie who cultivate hedonistic lifestyle, but whose “economic clout is practically zero” (Bila, 2007: 98), thereby emasculating the masses economically and alienating them socially.

In his address to Mr President, Bila’s preoccupation is not just about the abuse of office and the social injustice by the political class, he is also concerned about the consequences of the same, particularly in the area of health and well-being. Despite assurances to the contrary, public hospitals are ill-equipped and have even degenerated into “slaughter house” (Bila, 2007: 37), while AIDS, cholera, kwashiorkor, and marasmas kill children. As the poet feels disenchanted by this development, his sense of let-down is coldly articulated in the following lines:

Boom! Boom!
 We blew horns when exiles returned –
 We did not know you befriended Ronald Reagan
 And Margaret Thatcher.

We strummed guitars when prisoners walked free –
We did not know the mind got frozen in prison winter.
We shouted power to the people!
But business sucked the power of the state (Bila, 2007: 38).

Here, the poet recalls the excitement and celebration with which some of the exiled heroes of anti-apartheid struggle were welcome back to the country. Of course, this is not only because of their exploits and sacrifices, but also in the hope that they would use their experience, principled ideology, commitment and intellect to grow the new nation. However, disappointment and disillusionment would follow, for the people soon discovered that their so-called heroes have been schooled in Reagan and Thatcher's ways – neoliberalism. Like in the former colonies up north, the emergent elites of post-apartheid era have simply swapped places with the erstwhile Calvinist masters to become the new exploiters. In these lines, Bila can be seen as suggesting that the majority of the people are a bit naive in their trust and confidence in the erstwhile leaders of the struggle, now the new bourgeoisie. It is ironic that while the people surrender leadership to those who have little or no touch with the realities on ground, that is, the returnee exiles and jailed activists, during transition negotiations, they are actually shouting that power belong to the people, which does not include them. By surrendering the power they could have harnessed for the developmental benefit of all, the people, including mass movement groups such as COSATU, UDF and SACP, chose to invest the future in new folk heroes and mythical figures of yore, forgetting Fanon's warning that no single individual or select few should constitute the demiurge, the sovereignty. Fanon had warned that "the demiurge is the people and the magic lies in their hands alone" (2004: 138). To surrender leadership to such a selected few may therefore imply being an accomplice in what Barchiesi (2011) has described as precarious liberation.

In "Horrors of Phalaborwa", Bila presents a horrifying picture of post-liberation South Africa still characterised by unjust and inhuman treatments. The poem is about the barbaric murder of a black farmworker, Nelson Chisale, by his white boss, Mark Scott-Crossley. Chisale is tied to a tree by his drunk boss and two other black employees, and then severely battered by clubbing. His cry and pain are made sport of by "the barbarian" (19) murderer who appears trapped in the past. Chisale was loaded into the back of a van, driven to Scott-Crossley's game farm, and fed to lions. Through a juxtaposition of the images of a helpless victim and that of an oppressor who is literally drunk with alcohol on the one hand, and metaphorically drunk with power on the other hand, the poet inscribes a continuity of social injustice. The story of Chisale has it that he had been fired from work by Scott-Crossley for theft. However, when he later returned to collect his belongings he met

this horrendous fate. It is very difficult to believe that the extremely atrocious response to Chisale’s visit is incited by the theft or his audacity to return to collect his belongings. It seems more like a hangover of the sense of “might is right” that characterised South Africa’s apartheid past, which is also an example of injustice that has refused to go away with the past.

The poet, closing his eyes to imagine the scene of Chisale’s murder, declares:

i drown under the weight of pain
 i share the fury of this agonised world
 i can only shout
 ‘lock the savage in a cold cell for life!’ (Bila, 2007: 18)

Rather than the freedom and happiness happiness hoped for in the new era, the poet finds himself weighed down by psychological and vicarious pain. Although his use of “agonised world” appears to suggest the larger world of humanity, it is a better fit description for the apartheid years that seems reluctant to remain in the past, at least by 2005 the time of the incident from which the poem draws its afflatus. The poet’s anger at the injustice is easily noticed in the last line of the excerpt. However, while such a rage is one that the ordinary black person of apartheid years would have been constrained to mute, except during mass protests, some of their poets actually ventilate such feelings in their writings. In the foreword to *Handsome Jita*, critic Waller notes that Bila responds to “dashed hopes, betrayal; the visceral and corporeal responses to thwarted life, corrupted relations, smashed love, the throes of poverty” (2007: viii) with compassion, rather than anguish or rage. While I agree to Waller’s view about Bila’s compassion, his notion that Bila’s poetry is devoid of anguish and anger is arguable. In the above lines, the poet’s compassion is coextensive with anguish and rage.

Still angered by the murder of Chisale, the poet invokes jarring images of frustration and disappointment at the turn of events in a supposedly new era of bliss and multiracial brotherhood in South Africa thus:

eleven years into liberation –
 i have no gracious dream
 eleven years into liberation –
 there is no rainbow dance
 no straight distance we can walk

eleven years into liberation –
 what i can show the world
 is a harvest of dust and thorns
 eleven years into liberation –
 what I can show the world

is the rural poor's share (Bila, 2007: 20)

In these lines, the poet articulates his own frustration and that of his compatriots over dashed hopes and disappointments by the emergent black elites. The two stanzas present a contrastive but related notions of what the post-apartheid era offers many South Africans. While the first one captures the futility of beautiful dreams about the new era after about a decade, the second one depicts the misfortunes of the majority in the country. Using metaphors of dust and thorns, the second stanza evokes images of waste, emptiness and adversity. In other words, instead of prosperity and abundance, the lot of the rural poor is still poverty and “a broken hope” (Bila, 2007: 21). The reference to the poverty in the rural areas of the country as the only thing that can be shown as the “gain” of multiracial democracy is similitude of Mwangi's (1973) depiction of the rural areas as well as the ghetto suburbs of Nairobi in post-Independence Kenya. In Mwangi's *Kill Me Quick*, living in the countryside is so poverty-ridden and precarious that many are forced to migrate to cities, where the living condition of the masses is even worse. Commenting on the state of affairs in post-liberation South Africa, Hart speaks of “the persistence of mass poverty for the majority of the black population” (2014: 164). The four-time repetition of the idea that things are still far from being the desirable after eleven years of liberation further speaks to the frustration of the poet. Although eleven years may appear a bit short to remedy much of the iniquities and inequalities of the apartheid era, the fact that there is no sign that things are moving in the right direction for the majority of the black populace is hardly in doubt. For instance, one of the most crucial issues for blacks is the injustice of land redistribution. Unfortunately, the issue has been bungled by successive ANC administrations. While whites still retain possession of much of the land in the country, black elites have joined in taking possession of the so-called redistributed land, leaving the vast majority at gross disadvantage. This does not only confirm Cousin's view that the “elites have captured the policy agenda” (2003: 144) of land reform in the country, it also shows that social injustice in post-apartheid South Africa is now an issue of class, rather than race.

In none of his poems is Bila as expressive of disillusionment with the post-apartheid socio-economic injustice as in the one entitled “In the Name of *Amandla*”. He begins by asking his reader and, of course, South Africans in general, to tell him “what has changed in this village”. While this may be the poet's Shirley village, the ramification of his exploration suggests that he has the entire countryside and shanty towns in South Africa in mind. He makes an inventory of all those things that have refused to change and those that have even gone from bad to worse. He talks of kitchen without food, starving children, schools with “no desks,

textbooks & windows” (Bila, 2007: 92), dry taps, epileptic electricity supply, inadequate and poor housing, unemployment, and so on. These are the lots of country people, regardless of their skin colour. This is contrasted with the life of the privileged, the new political elites in the cities who send their children to private schools, apparently lack none of the essentials listed above, and also ride luxury cars. When one of them knocks down a “hungry child” by his car, all he does is contribute a cheap coffin.

Sole has observed that “[w]hile segment of the poor have received better basic amenities since 1994, the programmes to enable these have fallen short of the inflated promises made by the ANC before the 1994 elections, and far short of expectations on the ground” (2014: 116). Similarly, Marais, using UNDP figures, notes that close to half of South African population, mostly blacks, lives in poverty. This can certainly not be said to be what people expected from multiracial democracy. There has been no radical change for most blacks, economically-speaking. The pain and disappointment incited by this reality obviously serve as the pretext for Bila’s versification in his poetry. Not only does his poetry capture the pain of his people as they battle economic injustice, it also inscribes the poet’s anguish as his people’s voice.

Conclusion

In spite of exhortations to the contrary by early critics of post-apartheid literature, political consciousness remains a recurring decimal in the country’s literary landscape. While the inclination for political poetry is not limited to a particular racial category, it is particularly strong among black writers. As shown above, Bila’s poems are not only politically conscious and committed, they are steeped in frustration, mental anguish, and occasional anger, though in varying degrees. The foregoing analysis shows that the poems are laced with these feelings due to a betrayal of expectations and the ensuing sense of disillusionment with the turn of events after the transition to multiracial democracy. The poet is obviously saddened by the miscarriage of liberation promises in his country, especially by the renewed marginalisation of the majority of blacks. The article also notes that, like it was in the former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa up north, the emergent post-liberation bourgeoisies in South Africa, through a combination of incompetence, willful self-advancement, and cowardly compromise betray the hope of the masses. In the final analysis, the article shows that while there is a shared tonality in Bila’s post-apartheid poetry and the apartheid era poetry of black artists in terms of rage and frustration, some thematic contiguity is established between Bila’s poetry and the literature of other parts of post-independence Africa.

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