

LAURETTA NGCOBO

Interview

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En el mes de febrer de 1987, la escriptora Lauretta Ngcobo, nascuda a la República Sudafricana i exilada a Londres, va visitar Tarragona, convidada per la subunitat d'anglogermàniques de la Facultat de Lletres. Aquesta escriptora és autora de la novel·la *Cross of Gold*, en la qual recull amb tota la seva cruesa el patiment de la població negra de Sudàfrica i la lluita per la seva alliberació dins d'un règim de racisme institucionalitzat.

Lauretta Ngcobo ens va portar el testimoni directe d'un poble sotmés, i ens va trametre el seu convenciment de que la comunitat universitària pot tenir un paper important en la mentalització de la societat occidental envers l'ajuda al seu poble en lluita.

Aquesta entrevista recull els punts més importants de la conversa que vàrem mantenir amb Lauretta Ngcobo, en la qual hem intentat desvetllar els aspectes més interessants de la seva actitud com a escriptora i com a persona.

D.C. Now that you are far away from your native country and travelling around Europe, are you disconcerted by our ignorance of the situation in South Africa? Or on the contrary have

you found people who are knowledgeable and who wish to do something about the situation?

Well, it differs, of course, differs with the kind of people I meet, but, in general, the public doesn't know enough about South Africa and I think nowadays the world is confronted with suffering in many parts of the world and usually people have specialised in their interests. For instance, people who want to know about the problems in South America will more or less confine themselves to that part of the world that is known to them. And so, it is understandable when one doesn't know enough about all parts of the world. But, of course, it is my duty and the duty of other South Africans to awaken their understanding to our situation in South Africa and its causes. And we feel that we have the duty to do that. I don't get worried. I would get worried if they did not want to listen, but if they want to listen, I feel that it is something accomplished.

D.C. Do you blame the whole Western Culture for the troubles in South Africa?

Yes, yes, I do blame the whole Western understanding of colonizing and the abuse of that power, not only in South Africa but in many other parts. At this point I do blame the Western powers very much for the conditions in South Africa. They continue to benefit even when the situation is very extreme. Their truths, their economic interests, would be paramount to our suffering.

D.C. Would you be ready to reject Western culture in favour of Eastern culture?

No, I don't think I would, personally. I cannot speak for everybody. It is a great temptation for the mass of the people which has suffered under this system of Western culture —capitalism— to reject it as a social expression and I do think a lot of people think certainly socialism would fit in, and I'm one of those who feel that socialism in South Africa should exist. We ourselves traditionally have practiced socialism of our own kind. So, I feel that the socialism that is being introduced in South Africa should be tempered by a sensitive understanding of our own structures, not a rejection of our own structures. I think one of the reasons why socialism has failed in Africa so far is that it gets imposed on a culture and therefore it cannot be absorbed, it cannot vitalize the people's culture. Capitalism as it is practised in the West has certainly shown itself to be a very greedy way of life, a very inconsiderate way of life, and I wouldn't like to adopt capitalism in its fullest expression, in the

way I've seen it practised. I feel that if the world would leave us alone, if we were in a position —this is almost like dreaming— if we were in a position to adapt socialism and fit it into our life, into our structures, we would temper the cruelties of this system.

D.C. *Do you subscribe to the African National Congress policy which says that South Africa belongs to all those who live in it, whether they be black or white?*

I do believe that South Africa belongs to all South Africans. But there are problems in this, where one sector of the community have always seen themselves as leaders, as understanding what should be done. What I have seen of cooperation has really not so far been to my own choosing or to my own interest because I feel that there is, because of the privileged position of one section of South Africans, the position of leadership, the position of ability, the psychological position that they occupy. I think, when we come to settle things, it would be a sensitive act on their part if they gave way and allowed equality to develop among us. Otherwise, we are in danger of being led our friends. First we've been led by our enemies, we might still get led by our own friends and that would still stifle the character of the African. If people come and suggest: This is very good for you, this is what you must do, this is how it should be done, you're still following. And so the African National Congress policy of equality is no way. In other words, I feel that the white South Africans who will live peaceably with black South Africans will be those who had never had aspirations, will be those who will be sensitive to the position of the Africans, will encourage the development of the so far stifled nature or character of the Africans and allowed its expression too.

D.C. *What is your social purpose as an author?*

At this particular phase in my life as a writer, I think my interest is socio-political. I would like to express my society, my community, but, at this point, my community is so involved in a political struggle that expression of my society comes out mainly through politics taking a political angle. I would have loved to just write about things as they happen among my people, but there is no phase, no aspect of my social life that is not affected by the climate of politics in South Africa. South African writers don't choose their themes, they are chosen by the themes. The dominance of Apartheid and the oppression it gives to the whole nation-it makes

it very hard for pure writing, for joy, for the choice of topics and themes that would be available to other writers elsewhere.

D.C. *Does tai mean that if your country were not suffering from social unrest and injustice, then you would like to write a novel just for aesthetic purposes?*

About school life, about old age, about all kinds of subjects, about childhood, I'd love to write that, but even if I wrote about childhood today it would reflect so much of the ugly life that the children are exposed to. That's what I mean. But if one morning I just woke up into a new South Africa, I would love to write about everything else other than the painful oppression.

D.C. *At the beginning of your novel Cross of Gold one of your feminine characters, Sindisiwe, says, «Violence is morally better than passive submission; and acquiescence is evil». Do you agree with her?*

Yes. I think acquiescence is not only evil but ugly. When people know that they're oppressed and they allow it to happen, just watching them accept this pain, pretending it's not happening, it's awful to look at. It's worse of course for the subject from the inside and I don't think if there is a sense of right, whether you call it God or what, if there is a sense of right in life, this is one thing that justice and right would not accept as part of its packet. I think it when I say "it's better to die on your feet than to die on your kness". Because oppression kills. It kills the soul. It destroys you. And in fact it is such a confrontation with evil that the person who perpetrates the evil, the oppression, gets more angry himself because he has still got a sense of rightness in himself. When he sees you crawling on your knees he doesn't say «leave the dog», he gets more angry, he punishes you more for it because you're confronting something in him, a sense of correctness, a sense of right in his own life, and so he gets more offended and he despises you more. And so, I think, that statement is perhaps deeper than it sounds. It is right for yourself, it is right for your enemy that you should stand up and fight and die if necessary for your justice.

D.C. *You end the novel telling us about «a war of liberation» in which thousands of people are killed until finally the Defense Chief is killed by a white soldier and that puts an end to it. Do you really think that there must be a completely violent solution for South African problems or is there another way out?*

Over the years black South Africans, since the ending of the last wars with the white people in South Africa, they've resorted to petitions, to pleading with the government, to asking, to request. I think they were not on their knees, but they were nearly on their knees and we have been spurned by the various governments of South Africa. Instead of making it easier, they made it harder for us, and the decision that we had reached the end of the road with peaceful negociation was perhaps in the late 50s among a section of the political leadership. There were people who felt that we could not go on pleading and begging. We had to make a stop. We had to stand and confront even if we aren't armed. We had to demonstrate, we had to go militant. In fact, it was that movement, that forced the ANC to take a decision, to go militant. In fact, it was that movement, that forced ANC to take a decision, to go militant and to resort to violence. It does not look from all my experience —hate violence as I do, as a person— it does not look as if we can get that freedom peacefully, because white South Africans won't sit down to talk, let alone negotiate. And so if this is forced on us by the South African white population, and I think that there is every evidence that they are never going to negotiate peacefully, so we are confronted with a lot of bloodshed. It can only get worse because there is no other way. If we are going to be free the path goes through this bitter period of war and death. When I chose to have the Chielf, the Prime Minister, killed by one of his own people, this was a repetition. I took the scene from a historical fact, Dr. Verwoerd was shot at by one his own people. He just went to an exhibition and Verwoerd was around and they went straight and gave him a shot. It went traight through his jaw, but he survived it and a few years later he was shot at boy one of his own, right in Parliament, and he was killed there. No leader has encapsulated Apartheid more than Dr. Verwoerd himself, and it was strange that he should be killed by a white man because that white man had nothing to do with black politics. I have often wondered in my mind what he really did have against Dr. Verwoerd.

C.A. I'd like to know your opinion about the role of white Southern African writers. Do you think that the view that some committed writers give about the situation in Southern Africa can be accepted as being truthful to reality? Does their kind of writing help the fight for liberation of black people in Africa?

Well, the writing by white people —of course it depends on which ones. I assume you mean people like Nadine Gordimer, An-

dré Brink, Alan Paton and Doris Lessing— people like that. If we are thinking of those writers yes, certainly they do write to portray what they see of the Africans— considering that the African situation is beyond a barrier even for them. So it is what they can see out of their interest through this barrier. For me, if we think of the South African context, the one who sees it very closely is Nadine Gordimer; but she does not even assume that she understands it fully. She reports what she can see and she gives her judgement. It's an outside observation of life among black people. And I like most of her writing. There is very little written and it could only perhaps be written by blacks about the life that blacks really live in South Africa. And it's a pity that there isn't enough of this because they are the only people who really know the inside part of life in South Africa. Now people like André Brink. André Brink observes. I feel I've learned more about the Afrikaner spirit from André Brink through— there are times when I don't think he understands us. I think he understands the issues, but I don't think he understands the people. I may be wrong. I have not read everything he has written. I've read one or two of his major books and I feel he doesn't understand the people. I even sense he is afraid of the people. So from that point of view, I don't think he can portray clearly, fully, what we as African people feel. There are scenes in some of his writing that make me feel very unpleasant, although he is a very very fine writer. Doris Lessing was perhaps the closest when she did write about the situation. This was not South Africa, this was Zimbabwe. But I think of all the writers she did understand, she entered the spirit of life among Africans much more closely than perhaps all the other writers.

C.A. *From everything you have said, and also from your own writing, we can assume that you believe in the force of literature as a weapon. Don't you think that the effect of literature upon readers —both in the West and in the African continent itself— might come too late?*

Yes, in terms of when you consider who reads and what choices they have in their reading. In Africa very few people have access to books for various reasons, educational, financial and so on. Unfortunately the way things are happening in Africa, the way things are structured, there is very little communication. It's rare that you will find books coming from West Africa or North Africa right down in Southern Africa and so on. We've tended to have books coming through the West and then infiltrating back to the various countries. We are trying —we've had debates on this sub-

ject— on how we can assist the movement of literature within the various countries of Africa. I certainly do think literature is a very great road. Long before I arrived in England myself, I had developed a very clear picture of what the country was like. It is true that a lot of it was left to my own imagination but, whatever contrasts I made were derived from books. So books do have a great deal. I knew of Spain from reading books about the 1936 revolution here and in my mind all along I have had this knowledge of Spain. Otherwise Spain would have had no meaning for me at all, as a country. And so within my country too, I feel this is the case. And I think that, as the urgency of the situation develops in South Africa, more and more people, specially in the West, are going to want to read books on South Africa; and I think this will greatly enlighten them. This is why it is such a pity that African books are so badly marketed within Europe, and that people have little access to our books.

C.A. *I suppose you will agree that Commonwealth literature has become very «fashionable» in the last few years. Do you regard this increasing interest as a way in which Western society can counteract the misdeeds derived from colonialism, or do you think the time has come when we can speak of a new and lively body of literature that brings fresh air into the scope of literary creation?*

Yes, I don't think it is essentially a literary interest because, first of all, most of our writings which are accessible to the West are not in our languages, and so they may not come through as literary masterpieces, because of language handicaps — and of course, you know, unless one was really just studying different kinds of literature. My writing, for instance, would be affected by the fact that I am writing in English and I'm not writing in the African style — in our traditional style of oral literature — so, it may not conform to literary strictures. But I think the interest in the Third World literature is a result of social and political situations. You choose to say perhaps it is as a result of the, shall we say, the guilt in the Western mind about the past and trying to redress that. Yes, I think there is quite a bit of that, but perhaps not directly as just plain guilt. I think it is a sociological interest in the third world. And of course the Western world continues to create difficult positions long after they have left — what we call neo-colonialism. For instance, the poverty of Africa is still a direct result of the Western manipulation, and the economic battle that is going on between the third world and the first world is in itself perpetuating that guilt. It is not just about the past. The fact is

that people know that they are living so well while most of their resources come from the Third World, and the Third World is left in such utter poverty that they are dying because of it. And yet instead of squaring the whole thing, the least they can do, or the best they can do, is to transport charity. So it looks like a charitable act from the West when in fact they are doing less than they should be doing — because they should return the resources of the third world rather than keep them and continue to live so well while the others are dying. It is not charity at all. It is in fact a very meagre gesture on the part of the West towards the African continent and other Third World countries.

C.A. We know you are preparing a book about black women in Britain. Could you tell us a little about the situation of these women? — who they are, what they do. Does this book present them from a literary or a sociological point of view?

It is more of a sociological exposition. I have written an essay of about forty pages to introduce this, because I feel that for other people to understand what these women are saying, it is important that they understand the sociological situation we occupy just now in Britain and what the women are reacting to, sociologically, politically and otherwise. A lot of their books have a reflection of the past, some of them — I'm thinking of Grace Nichols who writes about slavery and follows the role of women from Africa, from the middle passage into slavery and to the present days. Her writing traces the black woman's life through her poetry. And some write about the Britain of today. People like Prescott are very hot and there is so much irony, and bitter irony, in her writing that some people would just dismiss it as too hot or say, why does she sound bitter, hard, harsh? It is a reaction to the situation. It is a kind of irony — there is a great deal of irony in her writing. She is ironical about every thing that is happening there. And so it is easier for people reading the book to understand and to appreciate this kind of writing in its place in the society. So although they write their pieces with a lot of their own work coming out through them, they write about themselves, about what they think of their own writing and so on. But this essay, that is my introduction, tries to give a background to the lives of black people in Great Britain today.

