



POWER, CLASS DIVISION, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN MIRIAM TLALI'S 'BETWEEN TWO WORLDS'

Mrinal Mudgil

PhD Scholar, English
Amity University Gurgaon

Dr H K Jha

Professor of English
Amity University Gurugram

ABSTRACT

Miriam Tlali (1933-2017), a celebrated South African writer, was the first black woman to publish a novel in English. Set in Soweto, Tlali's *Between Two Worlds* (1979) is eventually the first work to be written by a black woman, portraying the experiences of black women during the Apartheid era. The narrative also reflects upon the oppression of Apartheid system that benefited the white community while the blacks were subjugated. Tlali has also dwelt upon the treatment of blacks as second-class citizens who were paid less as compared to their white co-workers. The purpose of Tlali's writings is to portray South Africa's dire situation in a manner that reflects the dark reality being faced by the natives. With a detailed study of the characters and the narrative structure of the novel, this research investigates the impact of these burning issues in the modern world. This study also examines power structure, class division and social inequality portrayed in the novel by providing insightful information and ideas that might help create a society which is more inclusive, accommodating and peaceful.

Keywords: Apartheid, Inequalities, oppression,

Introduction

Miriam Tlali (1933-2017) was a South African author known for depicting the struggles of black African natives in her novels, essays and short stories. One of the pioneering voices in South African literature, her works focussed primarily on the experiences of the black women during the Apartheid regime. Tlali was also the first black woman in South Africa to portray the experience of black women in the oppressive regime, her works often revolved around the themes of Apartheid, social injustice, and the experiences of black South Africans, due to which most of her writings were originally banned by the then South African government. Her writings challenged the status quo and contributed to the broader discourse of social transformation and justice.

Black South African literature is a literature of protest. It protests against social, political, and economic arrangements which deprive black people of civil rights and free expression of their aspirations. As a

result, this literature has tended to be overwhelmingly political and proletarian in outlook, and concerned with the problem of colour and class. This preoccupation with politics makes it incumbent upon black South African writers to address themselves to the subject in a manner that reveals commitment. In the South African context commitment is calculated to inculcate political understanding and to promote change. (Clayton, 5)

Growing up in a country where individuals were treated differently based on their skin tone, Miriam Tlali had first-hand experience with the struggles and inequalities. Tlali's writings functioned as a form of political advocacy, drawing attention to the cruelties of apartheid and its effects on underprivileged groups. Her debut novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*, is considered to be the first work written in English language by a black woman in South Africa. Tlali's work is also important for its feminist perspective as her writing primarily focused on the experiences of ill-treated black women, who were often marginalized or ignored. Her characters were real and showed the strength, resilience, and struggles that black women face in a white man's world.

Miriam Tlali's debut novel *Muriel at Metropolitan* was banned by the then South African government as it offered a powerful and insightful look at the lives of black South Africans who were treated as second class citizens by the authorities. The novel was rewritten in 1975 as *Between Two Worlds* where Tlali depicted the miserable life of the blacks under the Apartheid regime through her protagonist 'Muriel'. Muriel, a young black woman worked at a furniture and electronic store as a typist. The novel reflects upon the relationship between black and white Africans especially at the work place.

The Republic of South Africa is a country divided into two worlds. The one, a white world – rich, comfortable, for all practical purposes organised – a world in fear, armed to the teeth. The other, a black world; poor, pathetically neglected and disorganised – voiceless, oppressed, restless, confused and unarmed – a world in transition, irrevocably weaned from all tribal ties. (Tlali, 17)

In the above-mentioned extract, Muriel reflects upon the condition of South Africa, a land that once belonged to the black natives has now been divided where the whites sit comfortably in their chair while the blacks are struggling with the basic needs of existence. The novel is set in Soweto, a black township in the country. Along with the entire country Soweto was also segregated and designated to groups based on their colour and the blacks were not allowed to visit or stay at the places which were designated for the whites. As the story unfolded, Muriel reflected upon the exchange of dialogues between a black character and a white character and how she was subjected to racial remarks from her white co-workers and white customers.

Muriel and the other black characters were often treated like second-class citizens by the white characters who were in higher positions of authority. One customer even called Muriel a 'Kaffir' which is an insulting term to a black African, and even asked her to go back to her own country. *It would be because I was black – and black is synonymous with stupid.* (Tlali, 122) These interactions demonstrate white supremacy and how racial segregation demeans people of colour. The pain does not end here, the title *Between Two World* has an important significance as it reveals how the whites treated Muriel and other black employees. The narrative also signifies the condition of black natives who considered all the black employees working for their white employers as 'white-master's-well-fed-dog' (Tlali, 110). The black natives considered their own people working for whites so as to suck all the money out of the blacks and fill the banks of the whites,

Tlali has used 'line' as a motif throughout her novel representing an imaginary wall created at the workplace separating the sitting area of blacks from the whites. Black employees were not allowed to sit or use the table that belonged to the white-side. Muriel mentions about 'Whites-only coat hanger' (Tlali, 190), 'Whites only rack' (Tlali, 127), 'Whites only lavatory, that I had been forbidden to use' (Tlali, 126) to reflect upon the inhumane treatment of the whites. Petty things like toilets were also separated and the blacks couldn't use the one reserved for the whites, and surprisingly the laws of the country prohibited the blacks from using the facilities which were meant for the whites. Muriel also mentions about the incident when her boss Mr. Bolch

removed the cushion from the chair before offering it to her, as if the cushion was only meant for white employees.

The Wage Board, the Industrial Council and the Trade Union, these all played an important part in protecting the interests and working conditions of the white workers, in determining their salaries, wages, bonuses, medical requirements (not only of the workers, but also those of their dependants and spouses), any various so-called fringe benefits which they enjoyed. Such facilities, I reminded him, were almost non-existent for the non-whites. (Tlali, 97)

The Apartheid system of South Africa deprived the blacks of equal pay too. Muriel, was much more qualified and had more knowledge than her white co-workers, but she was paid less because of her colour. *Mrs. Green and I were therefore both juniors, but because of the colour of my skin, I was the least. (Tlali, 66)* Tlali reflects upon how it was all in the hands of the white masters, if a black worker was able to please the master, then accordingly, he/she would be paid more as compared to other black workers but his wage would still be less than a less qualified white.

Tlali in her novel throws light upon the issue of interdependency between whites and blacks. She informs her readers about black natives who worked in the house of the whites and did the daily chores. The blacks would do everything from cleaning their house to cook food for the whites. Tlali reflects upon how the blacks cooked food for the cats and dogs who were kept as pet by the whites but found it difficult to fulfil the basic need of their own family. Despite this dependency the black people were still given a side eye.

I remembered how whites always told each other how blacks suffer from all sorts of diseases. That even the slightest physical contact with them can be very dangerous as most of them have unhygienic habits and are carriers of many infectious diseases. But why can they not see that avoiding physical contact will not immunise them? Can't they see that the only way to ensure that the air that they breathe and food that they eat will not be 'contaminated' by the blacks is by raising their standard of living and giving them adequate education? Surely more and more blacks then would come to appreciate the value of hygiene and clean habits? Surely everyone would gain by that because the two groups can never be separated. (Tlali, 107)

Tlali has mentioned about the incident when Muriel boarded a train reserved for whites as she was unable to catch her train back home and another incident when a white co-worker shared a car ride with Muriel. She reflects upon how uneasy it was for the whites to breathe the same air as her. The whites during the apartheid considered the blacks untouchable who suffered for all sort of diseases and any physical touch with them might be infectious enough. Tlali mentions this to highlight the fact that the whites had no issue having blacks as their maid, doing laundry or even cooking for the whites but they would suffocate if the blacks entered the areas restricted for the whites. Tlali mocks the incidence of a successful heart transplant where a black man's heart was transplanted into a white man successfully as it was of the same group and his system did not reject it. *'Surely the Coloured's heart was not cleaned out or sterilised first to make sure that none of his blood would be introduced into the white man's veins?'* (Tlali, 206) Tlali ridicules the situation by asking about Apartheid. Where is the disease now? Because now, just for that moment, the white characters believed there is no such thing as black blood or white blood.

The use of 'Pass' has also been asserted by Tlali in the novel. She talks about the plight of black natives who were meant to carry the pass issued by the whites to travel to different part of the country that once belonged to them. The fear of not having the pass kept many blacks on their toes, because they knew they would be sent to prison. Tlali also mentions about the wrist numbers which were given to the mining workers as the whites were unable to pronounce their name. Muriel's white co-workers also made fun of the names of the black customers while reading their letters which pleaded for mercy.

Muriel worked at the store that sold furniture and electronics, customer who were unable to pay their instalments were sent reminders about the payment. She points out the difference in the tone and attitude of the letter

addressed to a white customer and a black customer. *Where the 'bad' customer is white, the account is handed over to solicitors, an attachment order is sought, a messenger of the court accompanies the lorry and the goods are repossessed. To these general letters a few words, phrases or sentences are added to suit the particular cases of the individual customers. The wording becomes more severe as failure to pay continues. The letter must be able to exert just the right amount of pressure to produce the desired effect, namely inducing the customer to pay. In the case of blacks, the letters may be phrased in any way.* (Tlali, 49)

Tlali asserts that money or colour is not the only reason why the whites have been able to dominate the black natives of South Africa, she believes the lack of self-awareness, unity and psychological strength has paved way for whites to be in an authoritarian position. The character of Adam is one such example of a black man who has surrendered to the domination of white.

It was no use trying to speak to him. The long, painful years of contact with the whites had developed within him a hard protective core of indifference to all their constant abusive reprimands. He was dead inside. (Tlali, 126)

The ability to endure "long and painful periods of contact with whites" indicates a degree of emotional resilience. They have been subjected to abuse and maltreatment, demonstrating resilience to adversity. They have developed a "hard shield of denial" which has become desensitized to the bad treatment they've been subjected to. Their emotional armour protects them from the emotional harm they've suffered as a result of the abuse. The phrase "he was dead inside" suggests a deep sense of emotional disconnect or numbness. He's been abused by white people, which has caused him to suppress or dull his emotions, maybe as a way to cope with the pain of being abused all the time. Tlali argues that the lust of crown, of being powerful and sitting next to the white authoritarians had made some black native selfish to the extent that they considered their black counterparts as their enemy. Rather than fighting against the Apartheid system which deprived the blacks of the basic human rights they were more interested in filling their own pockets by being a pet to the whites and being cruel to their own community. *I've come here to work for my wife and children and I don't want to land in gaol. The white man is the boss in this land, he is the one holding the gun. You must listen to him.* (Tlali 61) Tlali mentions that any other fight would be second-rate and easy to do if the black guy could just learn to be proud of himself and feel good about himself, but in reality the blacks were self-centred. They were more concerned about their own little family rather than being concerned about their country as a whole which was striving under the threat of Apartheid.

After marriage you do not live happily ever after. You shudder at the thought of bringing into this world children to be in the same unnatural plight as yourself, your parents and your grandparents before you – passing on a heritage of serfdom from one generation to another. You are not human. Everything is a mockery. (Tlali, 150)

The imposition of Apartheid had created such a fear in the mind of black natives who thought marriage was no longer a social act. Marriage which would lead to producing an offspring was considered an immoral act by many black youth. They did not want to bring into this cruel world a child who would continue the legacy of being the subordinate to the whites. They did not want to continue passing the legacy of slavery from one generation to another. Tlali also mentions about the incident where the black infants are raised in slums and downtrodden areas, with no one to take care of them as their mothers were busy taking care of the children of their white masters. This treatment of black infants raised eyebrows of many natives who decided not to go with the cruelty of bringing kids to this life full of misery.

This is why it is essential to examine Tlali's novel as a specific genre within a particular geographical and historical context. It is a work of literature that supports and promotes the ideology of Black Consciousness. This is most likely the reason for the specific form that South African writing offers. Tlali's *Between the Two Worlds* can be treated as protest literature which acts as a record of the struggle against white supremacy, oppression, and exploitation. Miriam Tlali does not distort reality rather portrays it as it really is. Although it

depends a lot on the context of the story, Protest literature cannot be written on the basis of an incident. It is a literature which emerges out of deep first hand experiences rooted in response to the brutal oppression of the South African Apartheid state.

The concept of identity plays a significant role in Tlali's work, and this concept has been depicted very strongly in her literature. The novel examines the ways in which social and ethnic factors influence identity. Identity remains a major concern in the twenty-first-century society, as we seek acceptance and equality. The novel shows us that identity isn't just about who we are as individuals, but also about how we are perceived by others. It shows how wealth and race can affect our chances of success and define who we are. Tlali's *Between two Worlds* is a great reminder of how important it is to recognize the variety of identities in the lives of the people. The novel is an attribute to the struggle and suffering of the writer as well as for the natives of South Africa.

References

1. Tlali, Miriam. *Between Two Worlds*. Broadview Press, 2004.
2. Clayton, Cherry. *Women and Writing in South Africa*. Marshalltown: Heinemann Southern Africa, 1989.
3. Martin, Roland. "Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) | Steve Biko, Anti-Apartheid, Aims, and Impact." Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 June 2023.
4. Mukhuba, Theophilus. "Miriam Tlali's Muriel at Metropolitan: Black Consciousness and the Search for Self-Affirmation." Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, Mediterranean Center of Social and Educational Research, Nov. 2014.
5. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Apartheid | South Africa, Definition, Facts, Beginning, and End." Encyclopedia Britannica, 11 Aug. 2023.
6. Wikipedia contributors. "Miriam Tlali." Wikipedia, July 2023.

