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Interview with Sindiwe Magona

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Sindiwe Magona (1943) was born in the Transkei and grew up in the Cape Flats (Cape Town). She holds degrees from the University of London, the University of South Africa and Columbia University. She lived for a long time in New York where she worked for the United Nations and returned permanently to South Africa in 2003. She is involved in creative writing projects mainly addressed to women living in the townships of Cape Town. Magona has received many prizes for her literary works and is among the most prestigious writers of her country. She is the author of two autobiographies (*To My Children's Children*, 1990 and *Forced to Grow*, 1998), two novels (*Mother to Mother*, 1998 and *Beauty's Gift*, 2008), one collection of poems (*Please, Take Photographs*, 2009), various collections of short stories and many books for children and adolescents (among which the novel *Life is Hard but a Beautiful Thing*, 1998). Just as Bessie Head, Miriam Tlali, Ellen Kuzwayo, and Agnes Sam have, so Magona has used writing not only like a weapon against apartheid but also, sharply and up to date, against the patriarchal structure of South African autochthonous culture which oppressed black women almost as much and as viciously as racism did. Her acclaimed novel, *Mother to Mother*, which has been recently re-published in Italian (*Da madre a madre*, Italian translation by Rosaria Contestabile, Baldini & Castoldi, 2015, pp. 265), has also been issued in a special edition for schools with notes for teachers and parents and is a prescribed text for Grade 10 – English First Language/Mother tongue. I asked Sindiwe if she could answer some questions about herself and her work and she has kindly agreed to do so.

MPG: Sindiwe, all your works show that you conceive writing as an aesthetical practice with an ethical purpose. Since the time of *To my Children's Children* (1990) and *Forced to Grow* (1992) you made clear the importance of 'remembering'. The writer is the treasurer of a legacy which would otherwise be lost. What is your feeling about the new generations? Do you think they care about this legacy?

SM: I'm sure they do. But legacy is not static. What is legacy to me was life for my parents – ordinary life. So, legacy for the present generation will most probably be slightly different, seen from another per-

spective, that is from a historical and/or social perspective or lens. That does not mean there is not a shared and common base.

MPG: To deal with the past in South Africa also means dealing with pain: the burden can be a very heavy one. Has it ever occurred to you that youngsters would be better off without that burden? Do you think they really want to remember?

SM: There are things they should remember – whether they want to or not – because it is necessary they do that. You know the saying «People who neglect their history are likely to repeat the mistakes of the past…» or words to that effect. Yes, South Africa's past has a lot of pain in it, but that does not mean there were not moments of joy, of heroism, of beauty… that too needs to be remembered. We also need to celebrate the ordinary, the humdrum, the plain but extraordinarily exerting life of the common man, common woman – plain folk! The world could learn a lot from just watching a beetle, for instance!

MPG: Your novel, *Mother to Mother* (1998), which has recently been republished in Italy, offers an enlightened perspective on the issue of victims and perpetrators. In providing reasons to explain what was behind some acts of violence, were you not afraid that the same kind of reasoning could offer a justification also for acts of violence committed during and by apartheid? How do you feel about the explanation «they were ordered to act that way» which often came out in the TRC hearings?

SM: I doubt, very much, that people can divorce themselves from the times in which they live. However, that does not absolve the individual from personal responsibility, which is why it is important that the Humanities be accorded a status and recognized as important as that of the Sciences. From an early age, at home and at school as well as, where applicable, institutions of worship, the human being must be taught and guided in the tenets of humanity, the art and science of being human in and amongst other human beings. In those is carried the fundamentals or principles that have made it possible for human beings to 'live and let live' accommodating the wide variations that exist in people. We have lived mainly because of respect for all life. That is why these values and principles ought to be instilled in children from infancy. Yes, following orders will always be part of life in any society but there should always be safeguards – the eyes of the nations – in the form of an engaged, informed, participating citizenship. Dictatorships thrive where the general populace is either asleep or ill educated, which was the case during the apartheid era in South Africa: the masses of black people disenfranchised could not participate and, for various reasons, masses of the white people, who could and did vote, went to sleep, were brainwashed and ill-

educated into ineffectiveness – happened in Germany with Nazism! Education – education – education!

MPG: *Mother to Mother* came out in 1998 and even if it deals with a tragedy, it is a book inspired by the *ubuntu* and the positive emotional environment created by and around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, therefore a novel which is in some way optimistic. Almost twenty years have passed. Do you think reconciliation took place in South Africa? How important do you judge today the work of the TRC?

SM: The work of the TRC was not only important but a milestone in the history of the world. However, by its very definition which includes the word 'gross' to qualify the 'human rights' it was therefore limited in scope, only looking into the 'stars' among the oppressed. That left the majority of the oppressed unrepresented in the arena of the TRC. That was a pity because it overlooked an important aspect of any violation which is that such transgressions do not begin at the level at which the TRC applied itself but begin rather in small, insidious ways which, overlooked, slowly grow to gradually and incrementally encompass wider areas of life. The curtailment of Civil Liberties does not come in one big bang because that would be a shock of such magnitude it would not fail to raise the alarm and rouse the general public to riot against it. Gradual infringements are more likely to succeed and by the time society wakes up to what has been taken away from them it usually is too late… the toad in boiling water principle!

MPG: The I-narrator in *Mother to Mother* has a very poetical voice and balances the crude realism of the stories she tells with the emotional impact they create in the reader. How difficult was it to create such a balance, and was there any risk you felt you were running?

SM: The narrator in *Mother to Mother* speaks in the voice of a Xhosa woman and uses the idiom of that people. She is a spunky woman ground almost to dust by the machinations of apartheid. Dirt poor, she does the best she can, is upbeat about the future of her children despite what, to the onlooker, seems unsurmountable obstacles and odds. She is a woman steeped in the oral tradition of amaXhosa, including praise poetry and prayer and I think this is reflected in her speech. When she is emotional or scared, she appeals to the reader's feelings – the difficulty was giving her voice in the widest possible range for the journey she traverses without making her as though she were unfeeling of the pain of her 'sister-mother' or as though she did not see the seriousness of her son's act.

MPG: *Beauty's Gift* (2008) had very positive feedbacks from critics and the academia. What was the readership reaction to it in South Africa? One feels there was a pressing agenda behind it. Do you feel there

is still the need for such an outspoken text today, I mean, would you write it again today?

SM: Yes, I would write it today and, in fact, wish it could be translated into the indigenous languages of this country and beyond, especially in the languages of Southern Africa. In its first year of publication, *Beauty's Gift* made the Best Seller list in the country – a small readership means that figure most probably is around five thousand copies sold – and I have had very positive feedback, including from black men, a group about which I was a little nervous regarding the issues raised in the book. So that was gratifying.

MPG: *Beauty's Gift* is the story of a death but it also celebrates the power of love: all sorts of love. What inspired you to deal with the subject of Hiv/Aids from such a perspective?

SM: The idea behind that is that if we are to survive as human beings we need the support of those close to us. For people to survive or, better still, escape infection, it is necessary there be mutual support around the issue of sexuality. It is when women (and men) are not afraid of the tongues of their friends, family, and colleagues that they will be safe, their conduct no longer determined by fear of «what others will think or say». Then their behavior is likely to be more focused on what is best for them and not what is face saving – the former, more likely to save their lives than the latter. For those infected, again it is the love and support of family, friends, and colleagues that can determine better outcomes for them. Above all, Love should not kill and love of self is key to survival during these times of course but, in reality, during all times. Love of self is the basis for all kinds of love.

MPG: You have experienced different literary genres. What guides you when you opt for prose instead of poetry, and for novels instead of short stories; for autobiography instead of fiction, and so forth? Is there a genre you think suits you better than others?

SM: I started writing thinking I was going to be a novel writer. However, things have not worked out that way and I am the happier for it, I think. Yes, I would rather write novels but sometimes the issue is so pressing, time not to my favour, that I think better get it out in poetry or short story. Of course, there are subject or stories that will not grow to the lengths of novels just by virtue of their scope, whereas there are themes like the one with which I am dealing now - how tradition has betrayed the African Woman - cannot but be adequately portrayed in a novel. *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle* will, hopefully, come out late this year or early next year (date of completion: Fall 2015). As for biographies, mostly, the subject approaches me to write the book on his/her behalf… someone who has a life story that sheds some light on the times in which s/he lived. *From Robben Island to Bishopscourt* about Anglican Archbishop Njongo W. Ndungane, who

preceded Mandela on Robben Island and succeeded Tutu to Bishopscourt, is one. I am about to complete *Nayintombi*, biography of Thembi Mtshali – actress of some note in South Africa. Remember the play *Ip'Intombi*? – way back? - the title of the book is a play on that: *Ipintombi?* means «Where is the girl?» and *Nayintombi* means «Here's the girl». All in all, the situation or the issue seems to determine the vehicle I end up using!

MPG: Are there some literary figures, South African, African or from anywhere else, that have in some way 'influenced' you in your writing and how?

SM: First and foremost, Maya Angelou and Nadine Gordimer – in totally different ways. Angelou, because she was the first black woman writer I read and I was almost in my thirties. I didn't know then I would end up writing but she showed me that someone who looked like me could do this thing called writing. Years later, when I did start writing, it was her generosity and grace that helped me see that honesty in revealing even those aspects about oneself that one is less proud of does not in fact detract from but adds value to the writing because it shows integrity. I have never left one of her books thinking less of her even when she has revealed some less savoury aspect of her life – rather, for me, she shows me how she has grown, has overcome, transcended such and more and thus my admiration for her grows. Gordimer – because she is South African and white – helps me excuse myself for being the writer I am. At 16, she published her first story… I would be almost 50 when I did that – publish! She writes about black life in South Africa (among other things, of course), that encourages me, reminds me, the writer's most important weapon perhaps is her imagination… that does not mean one neglects research, of course. I have yet to write a pure 'white' novel/short story… but, this is not something I feel I can never do; it is just not a priority for me, right now. There are other writers, of course, I admire – male and female; children's writers too. I have written well over a hundred children's books.

MPG: You are South African, have lived in the States, travelled a lot. Having experienced many countries and cultures what are the things you cherish most about your own country that you would not find anywhere else and what are the things you cannot find in your country and like about other places you have been?

SM: The sea and the mountain… well, of course, one finds these elsewhere but, they're just never quite the same for me. The sun! Oh, the warm and strong-rayed sun that washes over one's skin! That one can feel warm and caress one's very pores. And the variety of colours on the faces of the people – languages too, languages I understand. I envy Europe and to some extent the Usa – the freedom women of all ages enjoy, living as they do without the ever-present threat of

violence against them. The cleanliness of cities and town that have mastered the art of recycling of ordinary people in their homes and efficient, effective, clean and safe public transport – oh, this last is something I really wish would come to my country.

MPG: You come from Gugulethu yourself and the place provides, I would say, more than simply a setting for many of your works: it is almost a character. Can you tell us more about the place, your relationship with it and how this relationship has changed, if it has, throughout time? How difficult was it to put the place and the people into words, that is, how difficult was it to make it fictional?

SM: The place chose me, of course, because it is the place with which I am most familiar, having lived there the longest in South Africa before I left. My young adulthood was spent there and that is where I raised my children to their early teens, when we left South Africa. Yes, I have fond memories of Gugulethu but I would not live there now unless forced by circumstances. All the townships are places of violence, gangsterism, poverty… depression. Making it fictional is not the difficult part, we are big on storytelling and stories abound in our lives, in both township and village – the difficulty is the art of transforming the story into literature – there's a difference to telling at the barber shop or by the riverside while doing the washing and writing it. The former, less formal… informal, really, is spontaneous and more fun! To 'talk' to the unseen, unknown audience means to imagine both the story to be told and the 'ears and eyes' – the people to whom the story is told – a hard call. Much easier when one can see the smiles, nods, grunts and laughter… But we persist in 'imagining' the audience and so, we write!

MPG: South Africa has produced an excellent offspring of authors shaping a solid literary tradition throughout the twentieth century which, in a way, provides a challenging standard for those who are writing today. What do you think of the new South African novel by young authors such as Sello Duiker, Kopano Matlwa, Henrietta Rose Inns, Niq Mhlongo, to mention only some?

SM: Today's writers, to me, seem less fearful, more robust… there is nothing, no theme or topic they hold taboo – good for them!

MPG: South Africa has always had and still has an excellent record of women writers. Do you find that the new liberal asset of the country, with its progressive Constitution, has made a difference for women writers?

SM: I think our newly won freedom with the liberal Constitution has given women the space in which to be without fear and some of them write about the issues that concern them. South Africa's women writers are bolder, going for gold – they write fiction and non-fiction,

including genres such as crime for which they have not been known for in the past.

MPG: What are you presently working on? Can you anticipate something for us?

SM: As mentioned above I have many ongoing projects: a novel: *Chasing the Tails of My Father's Cattle*, to be completed in Fall 2015; the biography of Thembi Mtshali, *Nay'Intombi!*, to be published next July; *Skin's Just the Inn!*, which is a book about skin colour/race for Age Group 9-14 to be published around September 2015; it was written in collaboration with the American scientist Nina Yablonsky and is illustrated by Lynn Fellman. I am also working on a Thesaurus in isiXhosa: that is a very, very long term project.

MPG: Well, good luck with everything then, and thanks a lot, Sindiwe.

SM: Thank you!