

COMMITTED TO THE STRUGGLE

Sipho Sepamla **Third Generation**
Skotaville Publishers 1986

Sipho Sepamla is without doubt one of South Africa's major poets. His poem "To Whom it May Concern" from his 1975 collection **Hurry Up to It!** remains for me one of the finest short satirical poems by a South African. Sepamla's third novel **Third Generation** cannot be placed in the same category as his best poetry but it is nevertheless an important work. Brutal methods of interrogation by the South African security police are vividly portrayed in this novel. But more importantly the author gives encouragement to all those involved in the freedom struggle. The novel ends on a triumphant note when the narrator leaves the country to continue the struggle:

"I left the house like one going to the toilet in the backyard. There never was a better way to leave home for a freedom fighter. There were no farewells, there were no trumpets blowing the last note. Africa I come!"

"Third Generation" is the name of a group who have committed themselves to the overthrow of the forces of repression. The founder members are Potlako, Solly, Thandi and the narrator, Lifa. They are later joined by Sis Vi, Lifa's mother, who is a nurse at Baragwanath Hospital. The main settings of the novel are Wattville, Soweto, Botswana and police headquarters in Johannesburg. Members of the Third Generation work closely with Papa Tukwayo ("Papa Tuks"). "A colourful character" who is "head of operations on the Reef". Sis Vi is sent on a secret mission to Port Elizabeth, though the exact nature of the mission is never made clear. Later she is detained, brutally interrogated and finally charged in the case of the State vs. Tukwayo. The other accused are Papa Tuks himself, Thandi and Solly. The exact charges are also never made explicit. They each receive stiff sentences with hard labour. Lifa is the only member of the group not to be picked up. As mentioned earlier he decides to leave the country for further military training.

The plot of **Third Generation** is absorbing but there are some structural flaws and the writing is uneven. Perhaps for some readers these flaws are unimportant. These readers might argue that the message is more important than the medium. Nevertheless it is a pity that some of the climaxes are not sustained. For example, towards the end of the novel there is an exciting description of Solly's escape to

Botswana. In Gabarone he is tricked by two black security police spies who pretend they are taking him on a pleasure trip to the north of Botswana. Instead they drug him and drive him across the border into South Africa. Here he is handed over to the South African police. The reader has become engrossed in Solly's story but in the middle of the chapter the focus switches from Solly to a police spy called Stompie Lukala who is beaten to death in prison. The chapter ends with an unintelligible sentence. I quote the full paragraph so that it can be seen in context:

"Speculation was rife as to how the police would lead evidence without their principal witness. But that was without reckoning with the industrious Major Brink. Besides the public's long lost confidence in the impartiality of some judges and its prayers centred on whom not to appoint for the important task".

Is this last sentence meant to mean something? Is it a printer's error? Why wasn't it picked up in the proofreading?

Another criticism (though a minor one) is that it is unnecessary for Lifa to have been made the narrator. As it is most of the story does not feature first person narrative. Why not stick to third person narrative throughout?

Third Generation is a novel written from the inside. No white writer could bring out such vivid detail of township life or of the endless debates about the struggle or of attempts to elude the police. Sepamla knows intimately the Buda B's, the Mmbathos, the Sis Vi's and the Bra Thami's of this world. The novel contains many references to recent events and to real life politicians. The name of Steve Biko is mentioned several times. Sepamla's central characters are well rounded. His white policemen are flatter but their cunning and their brutality are entirely convincing. The horrifying tortures that have been inflicted by some South African security policemen on detainees have been revealed in many court cases. Sepamla's accounts of police interrogations are not exaggerated.

In spite of its flaws **Third Generation** is an important novel. It is a tribute to all those involved in the struggle against racist oppression. But in particular Sepamla admires the Sis Vi's of this world. As the blurb says: "Third Generation celebrates the courage and commitment of Black women in the liberation struggle".□

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