

MDUDUZI HLOPE – AN ANALYSIS OF THEME IN HIS PLAYS

INTRODUCTION:— Mduduzi Hlope has written a number of successful radio plays as well as a recently acclaimed T.V. play "Usenzekile". Hlope became popular as Radio Bantu announcer through programmes he presented as well as radio plays he wrote. In 1980 he was transferred on promotion from Durban to Johannesburg SABC studios. Recently he has joined T.V. 2 where he has also shown his ability in writing T.V. plays. The public demand for a second feature of his T.V. play "Usenzekile" bears witness to this. A further confirmation of the success of Hlope's T.V. play is the first-prize award recently accorded this year. Hlope's early successful radio plays are "Ngibuyela KwaBakithi" translated "I will return to my homeland" and "Hlelani Imindeni", "Plan Families".

In this paper I will illustrate Tomaselli's observation on ideology and class in South African cinema. Hlope's radio and T.V. plays will be used as a concrete example of this observation by Tomaselli, namely that

"The diffusion of this ideology is facilitated primarily through the government monopoly in radio and television broadcasting, particularly Radio Bantu. Most of the content of this station is aimed at the maintenance and in fact, the renaissance of the traditional tribal values and social institutions and their implementation in homelands".

I will further demonstrate that the success of Hlope is in fact, not a theatrical one as we may be led to believe.

On the contrary, the real success is of the political-ideology of apartheid which South African blacks must consume. So that what Hlope succeeds in, is diffusing this ideology through theatrical genre. Thus, if there is any theatrical success in Hlope, it is success as described above, namely to bolster apartheid ideology as justified and natural through theatrical synchrony. Finally it should be said that Hlope has the advantage of mass media monopoly, so that a result of limited mass media alternative for different expression, Hlope's success is uncontested success in any way.

To enable the reader to evaluate the substance in the introductory remarks above, it is appropriate to give a synopsis of the three plays by Hlope.

1. NGIBUYELA KWABAKITHI (I WILL RETURN TO MY HOMELAND)

This radio play depicts the experiences of a rural man who stays in the township whilst employed as a factory worker. This man has always dreamt of winning a lot of money from horse betting. Thereafter he would return to his rural home, if his dream came true. Motivated by this, he always tries horses.

His wife is very angry with him because he never wins, yet he continues pouring money into horses. When, at last, luck comes his way, it is discovered that his ticket is one of the only three correct jack-pot entries. He gets a big sum of money. Now it is his time to make his dream a reality. That is, going back to his rural reserves home. He gets a lot of opposition from his wife who prefers staying on in the little township. In spite of this opposition he gets back home and establishes himself as umnumzane.

2. HLELANI IMINDENI (PLAN FAMILIES)

Like its predecessor **Ngibuyela Kwabakithi**, this play has an urban township setting in a peri-urban squatter camp. A theatrical and melodramatic term "Emjondolo" has been coined to refer to the squalid shanties in the play. The plot is about the family which refuses to use the freely available family planning service. The result is prolific breeding. Later the big family can not be accommodated in their four-roomed house. The big number of children cannot be adequately provided for nutritionally, educationally and even in clothing. This is made worse by the fact that the father is work-shy. House rent is also not paid and eviction follows. After eviction they find that moving to the squatter area is the only alternative. Eventually every family member is involved in the evils and problems of most squatters, mainly because parents did not do family planning in the beginning.

3. USENZEKILE:

Usenzekile is the first TV play in Hlope's series. There is so much continuity with the previous radio one, **Hlelani Imindeni**, that the same major characters of the former are featuring again in **Usenzekile**. In this play a Malawian widower has a successful business in Johannesburg. He employs two young female shop-assistants; first a township girl and later a country girl. The country girl proves to be a more efficient and honest worker. Although the town girl has a business insight, she is very dishonest. She steals a lot of food from the employer's shop to support her family. Her father is a work-shy man who drinks heavily and often beats his wife mercilessly. This is like the situation in the former radio play, **Hlelani Imindeni**. That is, a socially failing family structure starting from the family head down to children.

As in **Hlelani Imindeni**, **Usenzekile** singles out urban township life style as a producer of socially and morally unstable human beings. In the TV play all characters of urban township origin display an undependable character. For instance, Grace

the shop assistant not only steals, but also has a hand in the destruction of her employer's shop by fire.

Part II of *Usenzekile* still carries on this theme of township hollow character and morals. And as rural people become assimilated into township life style, they end up being destroyed by this. This is what is in store for this businessman and his wife, the country shop-assistant whom he ultimately marries.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Analysis shows that Hlophe's plays revolve around a special core-concept of determined political ideology in South Africa. By means of theatrical or entertainment camouflage, this political message is conveyed in a less painful version, yet still uncompromising in formulation, for the target group to consume. The message is in accordance with Tomaselli's formulation:

"The renaissance of traditional tribal values and social institutions and their implementation in the homelands"

As may be seen, this message is within the grand structure of apartheid, with its many ramifications in the urban black problem, the housing problem and the basic land issue. Through the impact of theatrical dilution and mass-media toning-down effect, Hlophe's play has the psychological effect of rendering these issues less poignant for the affected group.

So that in the radio play, *Ngibuyela Kwabakithi*, the homeland policy is reinforced. Mass-media and TV plays have the psychological effect of making the minds of people accept the geo-political and socio-economic arrangements as natural. Listeners and viewers are to hear and see themselves in politically determined socio-economic roles as if that is a natural arrangement. To acquire this effect of rendering the politically-determined to sound as if naturally ordained, Hlophe's plays apply a technique of confusing the cause-effect relationship in social process. So that in "*Hlelani Imindeni*" a complex socio-economic problem of urban squatting is simplified by a confused cause-effect formula of high-birth-rate and housing-shortage, which could be combated by family planning. The cause of squatting should be sought in a high birth-rate which is both an antecedent and a cause of housing shortage. Hence family planning is upheld as a likely solution to this problem. The effect, of course, is too obvious, namely the evasion of politically-related causes and a substitution of these by individually-based causes. So that "you have nobody to blame for your situation" because of "the right of all population groups to self-determination" and "Private initiative".

It was an interesting coincidence that the play "*Hlelani Imindeni*" was in the air at the very time when the Crossroads squatters were part of a public controversial issue. How the ordinary radio listener received the Crossroads news which coincided with this play, could have been an interesting investigation of mass-media influence of attitude-change and development. Without any concrete data to this regard, it can still be claimed that the coinciding of this play with the

reality of Crossroads was not insignificant. It would have to be borne out by research whether the play or the Crossroads reality was seen in a different light because of the coincidence.

LINGUISTIC EFFECT

Apart from the political distortions and social-psychological manipulations described above, the play "*Hlelani Imindeni*", has subtle psycho-linguistic manoeuvres. I will demonstrate by citing from the play how a linguistic effect is also harnessed to intended political ends. In this play Hlophe has coined a Zulu term "*Mjondolo*" for a shanty house. The term has become so received and popular that it has, through usage, widely extended its connotative and denotative sense from its original meaning (shanty home). The fluid usage of the word originated from the character in the play, a Malawian, who could neither pronounce the word well nor use it correctly in its restricted sense. His ludicrous incorrect accent and malapropisms caused a lot of humour and attention around the word "*Umjondolo*". In fact, even in the TV play, *Usenzekile*, the actor still enjoys wide popularity because of his Malawian accent and humorous grammatical errors (pidgin Zulu). This had the tragi-comic effect of romanticising shanty houses out of their reality. This streak of romanticism about shanty life was further manifested in a spurt of easy-go musical records about *Mjondolo*, released during and after the time the play was in the air. Again records were played by Radio Bantu. I am arguing that in plays of this nature there is also a psycho-linguistic component as a dimension of political distortion machinery.

I have already mentioned that the Malawian character uses the same linguistic devices in the TV drama, *Usenzekile*. The impact is even stronger seeing that a visual dimension is now added. While viewers hear his ludicrous grammatical errors and accent, they also see his gesticulation and grimaces. The major plot and sub-plot events in *Usenzekile* all retain a single message namely:

"Stable morals and character are a very rare human attribute among township people, while on the other hand, they are the order of the day in rural areas".

So that in the first play "*Ngibuyela Kwabakithi*", the man who wins a big sum of money and returns home, is acting on this principle. That is, retaining what is good in him by avoiding contamination. Even the musical prelude to *Usenzekile* Part I implies this principle as a fact. It is a woeful song about *Senzekile*, the character after whom the play is named, who leaves her rural home for Johannesburg. The singer of the prelude, probably her mother, regrets the departure of *Senzekile* because she will never be fortunate in the large city. It is as if things could have developed better if she had remained in her rural home. Who knows, she might indeed end up in the plight of the family described in "*Hlelani Imindeni*". In fact this play is continuing and events in Part II are already taking a bitter turn for *Senzekile* and her husband. It seems that they ought to have transferred to their homelands as soon as their business prospered, as was the case in "*Nqibuyela Kwabakithi*". As it is

now, trouble is building up for them as they are planning to increase their business. They fall into a trap and they accept capital from crooks who pose as financiers. At this stage, the plan has already shown how these crooks destroy their clients once they get hooked into a deal with them. These episodes already adumbrate what is going to happen to Senzekile's husband.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have given concrete examples in support of Tomaselli's reflection on South African cinema. Tomaselli's framework has been used to analyse radio and TV here because it is felt that this analysis has the same validity for radio and TV plays. For the same reason, it is maintained that Hlophe's plays are typically of the "Back to

Homelands" movie typology as described by Tomaselli where:

"The movie worked to reinforce the then official government rationale that urban life constitutes an alien existence for the black person and the Homeland policy was designed to assist black people . . . This observation presupposes that densely populated housing settlements found in the homelands border areas (squatter camps included) somehow qualify as an expression of their traditional way of life".

A second task has been to illustrate that behind the superficial surface meaning there a deeper hidden political message embodied in the text and that Hlophe's talent is caught in this ideological spiral. □

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