

IN CONVERSATION WITH LAURETTA NGCOBO

Brian Worsfold

Lauretta Ngcobo was born in Natal, South Africa in 1931. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, she went into exile with her two children in 1963, living first in Swaziland and then joining her husband in London in 1969. Lauretta Ngcobo began her first novel *Cross of Gold* almost immediately after arriving in England and has combined her work as a primary school teacher with that of her writing. *Cross of Gold* was published by Longman in 1981 and her second novel to date, *And They Didn't Die*, was published by Virago in 1990. Lauretta Ngcobo has also edited a collection of essays by Black women writers living in Great Britain, *Let It Be Told*, published by Virago in 1988, and has written a book for children, *Fiki Learns to Like Other People*, which has been published recently by Macmillan. She is currently working on a collection of short-stories.

A former President of The Association for the Teaching of African, Caribbean, Asian and Associated Literatures (ATCAL), Lauretta Ngcobo has been an invited speaker at numerous international conferences on South African literature, has contributed articles to various journals and is a well-known participator in the discourse on African women's rights and in particular the situation of South Africa's rural women. Although still living in London, the changing political dispensation at home has made it possible for Lauretta Ngcobo to plan her return to Natal.

This interview took place in Lleida, Catalonia, Spain, in March 1993 during a stop-over in Lleida on Lauretta Ngcobo's journey to Barcelona where she was an invited speaker at «The End», a conference on literary discourses in English and the language at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries which took place at the University of Barcelona from 23-25 March 1993. The interview refers in particular to her perception of aspects of the legacy of apartheid.

Brian Worsfold. When I was in conversation with Lewis Nkosi in May 1989, he said that one of the tasks of Black South African writers has been to record and comment on the idiosyncrasies of the apartheid system. In what ways do you think the current dismantling of apartheid in South Africa will affect Black South African literary discourse?

Lauretta Ngcobo. I think the task of Black South African writers is to, first of all, record the very complex changes that have taken place —record them perhaps not as the journalists are doing, but so that they take on some kind of meaning for ordinary people,

for all of us. The constant, endemic violence ceases to make any sense and I believe there is a great need to help people understand the situation. Once ordinary people understand the roots of this critical situation, perhaps we can get out of it more quickly. Having said that, I think one of the greatest preoccupations that faces these writers is, firstly, to *recover* the lost history, the lost culture—not just recover it per se but *integrate* it into the new situations. Our history and culture must be nurtured since they have not been left to experience the luxury of steady development. Normally, culture grows at its own pace and makes its own adjustments slowly, but in our circumstances, which have given rise to gaps in our history and experience, a concerted effort is required to link up the written word with the oral culture and to render our culture equal to all other cultures, to redeem it from the position it has occupied for the last two hundred years. So I think that, when people have been as deprived culturally as Black South Africans have been, one of the most important things we should do is to enrich cultural experience generally, not just oral culture on its own, and to bring as many people into a cultural experience as possible.

B.W. Following on from that, when Lewis Nkosi talks of recording and reporting the idiosyncrasies of apartheid society, the suggestion is that the readership of this literature is in fact outside South Africa—is an international readership—and that the purpose was to arouse the awareness of the evils of apartheid in the international arena. Do you think that now the readership for Black South African writers might change, in that now, in the educative role that Black writers might have, the readership should be Black South Africans?

L.N. Well, of course, that is a great necessity, although it has got its own constraints. You are going to have to work a long time to develop a readership within the Black South African public. But I think consciousness is a key factor—there ought to be a greater preoccupation on the part of South African writers with the needs of their society, the needs of the South Africans themselves. I think one of our duties is to upgrade the quality of our literature so that it is qualitatively comparable with writings from the rest of the world. You know there is a feeling amongst South Africans that their literature is below standard. Just a few days ago I was reading a comment by somebody who wrote that anything written by South Africans, no matter what its quality, was accepted because there was always this cinderella element which caused allowances to be made for us. Even the tolerance the rest of the world has shown towards our single-mindedness is in itself a disadvantage in a way because we earned this privilege of being accepted because conditions for us were as they were. But now we shall have to work hard to upgrade that literature, to build it up, to make it distinctive. That is why I am interested in the oral aspect of that culture because it is one of the things that can make South African culture, in particular its writing, distinctive. Otherwise, I do not see why it should be regarded as special, why it should be “South African”. It could come from any other part of the continent or any other part of the world.

B.W. Do you think the link, then, between the oral literature and the literary text will eventually constitute a feature of writing from South Africa and make it distinctive from

the works of those authors who write in the European style or contribute to European genres and the English canon?

L.N. I believe that writing in particular and culture in general is rooted in the myths, in the psyche of a nation—in the past, in the beliefs of that nation. A great deal of Western literature, even that which features the situation in South Africa, is really rooted in the myths and the beliefs of Europe. This is not surprising since most of this literature has been written by South Africans of European origin. However, we (Black South African writers) must delve deep into the culture of South Africa, into the roots of that culture, into the myths and the beliefs, in a bid to understand its essence, not just the fantastic and exotic aspects. I think this is essential if our writings are to be meaningful to the people we are trying to help in their present acultural predicament or reintroduce to our culture. Inevitably, many people, especially city people, have lost their culture altogether. Consequently, their writing is often entirely unrooted; they can never be truly European in cultural terms, they can never understand the roots of a culture as Europeans understand it, and therefore, if they have lost their own culture, then they are truly floating in space. That kind of culture is going to create a totally new animal and there are even people who are advocating a new language, a compromise. The Caribbeans have done that. They have the creole because they have lost something in its entirety. But for me it is drastic and totally unacceptable that a people, who have retained their languages through all the difficulties, are now being persuaded to accept compromises that are totally unnecessary. We are in the mess in which we are today, in many ways psychologically, in our reaction towards White people and the oppression we have suffered, because White people told us that we were uncivilized and so we fled from our cultures, we fled from our languages, we fled from our ways. The confusion today, even the political confusion that is occurring, is a consequence of this loss. So I believe very strongly that African writers, who are mainly city people, have got to be persuaded to look again, to go back again, to drink from the sources of their own understanding, to understand what they are doing on a daily basis. So, that's how I feel now.

B.W. Let's move on to another aspect. Or maybe it all links up. In a talk you gave at the Commonwealth Institute Women Writers' Workshop (London, February 1993), you stated that the West should not try to force its own political structures on the newly-emerging democratic dispensation in South Africa and you suggested that kingship is one institution common to many Black South African nations that might be reconsidered within the democratic framework. Could you say a little bit more about that?

L.N. Well, of course, when I was giving that talk I was speaking about the whole continent. I was thinking aloud about what has been going on all the time. It is no longer a question of not imposing this or that system because, as far as Africa is concerned, the imposition of new or Western types of democracy has been happening ever since the advent of colonialism. Throughout the period of colonisation traditional systems of kingship have been systematically eliminated and substituted by democratic structures. Where they did not get rid of them altogether, the colonisers reduced the power of kingship systems so that, even when independence came and the colonial experience

was said to be in the past, they have no influence whatsoever. And then, of course, it is true that South Africa is a case in point. I hesitate to enter into that debate myself at this point, when the politicians are busy with other aspects. I would love to. I would love to suggest it to South Africans and say, «Look, one of the reasons why the continent is in ruins is because its authority structures were destroyed and Africa, from the days of way back, the beginnings of the Egyptian kingdoms, has always thrived under systems of kingship.» I feel that if South Africans had been left to think their problems through for themselves, if for instance after 1990 the Western world had encouraged debate between South Africans, things might have been different. After all, the raging storms of the last 30 years have not once given us the opportunity for a debate. And yet the outside world has not been at all helpful. They have not encouraged discussion and, in fact, they have strongly encouraged division amongst South Africans. If we, as co-citizens, had had the opportunity to talk, one of the options that I would have wanted discussed at the negotiating table is the option of reviving kingships. Those kingships would not replace the main structure of authority, in other words, the government, but would exist parallel to governmental structures as is the case in many European countries, like the United Kingdom, where the system of kingship is powerful and has helped the country through all kinds of storms. Many countries in Europe have these systems running parallel and I don't see why they couldn't have been made to run parallel in South Africa. I believe that, if the status of all the kings in Southern Africa had been raised —there are already powerful kingships in Swaziland, in Botswana, in Lesotho and among the Zulus, and Xhosas have the rudiments of kingships still obtaining—, if there had been an effort to recreate the authority of these figures, then we would be talking of people who are rooted, who don't feel threatened, who don't think that «My leader is going to lose», because really their leaders wouldn't be losing, they'd be standing strong.

B.W. This would be a symbolic authority within a democratic framework?

L.N. Depending on what they wanted. They could actually create a separate House of Kings. They could do that; there would be nothing wrong with that. But of course when you mix kingships with party politics you might have problems. But it would have been possible, perhaps, without involving them in the party political system —something like the (House of) Lords in Great Britain. So I don't see why it should not be an option. I think if that were achieved the various groups in South Africa would feel much less threatened. But I repeat, when I gave that viewpoint (in my talk) I was thinking of the whole continent, not just of South Africa. I would have been very happy if South Africans had had the foresight to look into this.

B.W. Do you feel that people you know in South Africa share your opinion?

L.N. No. I have not discussed my views widely. I have been surprised that it doesn't seem to occur to any of the leadership in the whole continent that this is one of the problems facing them. Coup after coup after coup. Now we have people like Chitimukulu in Zambia —powerful kings who are still regarded very highly today, and yet everything peters out. They are totally forgotten. Nobody knows about Chitimukulu and the

loyalties that he commands. People have ignored the option for very long, especially when I think of it in terms of the whole continent.

B.W. But how high a profile would you suggest the Zulu King has amongst the grass-root community in Kwa-Zulu?

L.N. In Kwa-Zulu, King Goodwill Zwelithini reigns supreme. He unites everybody. There are very, very few people who would not pay their respects and listen to him. King Zwelithini is very powerful as far as the Zulus are concerned. In fact, it is unthinkable that he could be reduced in any way. Gatscha Buthelezi might get some unfavourable criticism, politics is politics, but nobody comments unfavourably about King Zwelithini.

B.W. Do you think that debate, even if not directly related to kingship, but more debate will be necessary before some form of compromise or some form of harmonious government is possible in South Africa?

L.N. I don't think it should really have to dawn on the leadership of all parties that what we need — what we needed at the beginning, what we need now, and what we will always need — is a kind of debate. But whether that is still possible after the atrocities of the last three years I do not know. I think there's an element in our politics which is bent on preventing those debates, and when they prevent the debates they are then actually firing the question of violence.

B.W. To change the subject again. You will be returning to South Africa for good in the near future after 30 years in exile, a good part of that time in the UK, and your intention is presumably to continue writing once you are back in South Africa. How do you envisage the transformation from writer-in-exile to writer-on-home-soil will affect your creativity?

L.N. Well, first of all, I think my writing will continue to suffer what it has already experienced in exile. Unfortunately, certain political powers can be very antagonistic to those who do not support them fully, to the hilt. I think it is honest for me to admit that, as a writer, I have suffered over the last five or six years, that is, my writing has been affected quite seriously by the political machinations of certain organisations. And so, going back to South Africa — I have been invited to certain conferences by South African groups who are aligned to certain political organisations — is, I believe, almost a test. I think they would like to win the support of as many people as possible, and I think the good gestures, which I welcome because, although I don't necessarily agree politically with certain politicians, I have never had any specific quarrel personally with anybody. But my worry is that if I don't give the 'correct' response — I'm not quite sure of the nature of that response — but if I continue not to give the responses that are expected of me in order to be accepted, in order to get supportive reports and that kind of thing, I might continue to suffer isolation. So I am prepared to continue as always. I am going to write the way I've always done and people who accept my writing will carry on reading my works. My only wish and hope is that, even after I'm gone, posterity will

recognise some of my ideas, some of my views and find my contribution to South African literature worthwhile. That's one part of it. But also, there is the more personal aspect of writing. South Africa had never really been a great inspirer and supporter of Black writers. I do hope, however, that the changed political conditions will induce in me a wholeness that will promote free creativity. Another problem is to do with the social expectations of the life-styles in our communities. The extended family and its communal life, or what I might call the 'open-plan' life-style, where people come in and out of your life and mingle and expect you to get in and out of their lives on a day-to-day basis, is a beautiful life-style and a most healing kind. But I don't think it's so compatible with the life of a writer. It does not allow for the one-woman space that the life of a writer calls for. So, at this stage, I can only say it is an unknown experience for me. I don't know how it's going to work out and it is something that's causing me a bit of anxiety. I hope I can manage it, or else go round it, by finding a way to spend a couple of hours in some secluded library corner or somewhere like that and continue my writing. So I hope to be able to write but, of course, for the first few months or even years perhaps I may not be able to write anything because uprooting a whole home and re-establishing your life in a new country —new, I said, because South Africa is not exactly the South Africa I left— might also stand in my way. That's why now I'd like to finish off what I'm doing.

B.W. But you do find yourself making a conscious adjustment. You are slowly moving away from the figure of writer-in-exile and you are slowly adjusting your attitudes, your forms, your attention, to writing on home soil?

L.N. Yes, certainly I am doing that even though at this particular point I'm doing all I can to move very carefully. I do—I must admit this—I do feel somewhat like an outsider. I understand a lot of the issues that are going on in South Africa. In some ways, I feel I understand the situation better than some of the people there, in particular the young people who are there, in that I know the history behind a lot of things. I understand the source of many ideas and sometimes, when I listen to young people talking, I feel they lack the necessary historical background to analyse their present political position. When they destroyed our political history in earlier struggles they handicapped the whole nation, especially our youth. So I'm doing all I can to adjust to writing as a South African. I'm writing at present a book of short-stories. Again it's still with one foot in the door, observing almost like an outsider the changes in people's lives, what's going on.

B.W. Do you find your authorial voice changing as you move into a new situation?

L.N. It's hard for me to say whether there will be a change for my authorial voice. I think there are bound to be changes with all writers. The major change is that what I'm going to be addressing is no longer apartheid. It's no longer going to be the helpless suffering of the people, although I realise I might still have to deal with a lot of suffering. It will be from a totally different perspective. So there are bound to be changes. But I think it will still be the same voice, directed elsewhere. I hope I won't change my authorial voice.

B.W. And, following on from that, do you perceive that you might be addressing a different readership?

L.N. Of course I shall be addressing a different readership. I am going to be addressing South Africans almost solely. I shall be dealing with South African minds, South African needs—at least I hope so. I may even step out of the compulsive need to write about apartheid and the pre-occupation with South Africa. The book I am so anxious to write is not about South Africa, and who knows what's going to happen. I have just written a children's book¹. There is a great need for children's books in South Africa and a great demand. I may even change my genre. In a country where there is a paucity of readers we are going to need more visual forms of expression and, therefore, scriptwriters for radio, TV and theatre. But I have not attempted any of this. At present I just recognise the need.

B.W. Well, let's talk for a moment about the short-stories. You've written three short-stories, one was almost a novella, about 60 pages long, and then two short-stories which relate to South Africa in this transition period.

L.N. Yes, but my theme on the whole is going to be social life at this time of transition. What's happening in people's lives, ordinary people outside politics.

B.W. Whereas before you had written fairly long novels on apartheid, why have you now changed genre?

L.N. I think it was due to my visit to South Africa—that feeling of observing what was going on, seeing things happening as if in a kaleidoscope. I think if ever I was going to write short-stories this was the time. A novel is more pointed; it concentrates your efforts on one point and you work around that one point. The scale of a novel is vast. For me, writing short-stories just happened; it is not something I had planned; it just appealed to me as one way of capturing the spirit of change in people's lives. Some of the stories are comic, others serious, and some are social comment. I don't think I could have written that into a novel easily. I just felt it would be best if I wrote in short-story form.

B.W. We talk of this period as a transition period from an apartheid régime to a democratic system. Do you have a real sense that this is going to be a brief period?

L.N. No, I don't. Brief, of course, in terms of history—history is long—but if you mean in terms of the heat at present in South Africa, I think it is going to be quite long. I don't see any way it can be short. There is so much to put right. Furthermore, to tell you the truth, I don't think there is anybody equal to the task at this point, not even the South

¹ The collection of children's stories is entitled *Fiki Learns to Like other People*, and is published by Macmillan.

African government. I don't think they're equal to the task that is set before them. I don't even know if they are sufficiently determined. I recognise a political willingness; I believe the South African government politically has set itself this task, but I don't think the South African government contemplates for one moment the handing over of the economic structure nor even the cultural structure for that matter. And so a complete hand-over is, I feel, going to take a very long time. And in some cases it is going to be thwarted by the very people who want it, who are working for it. There is no freedom without the economy and there is no freedom for a people whose culture has been decimated the way ours has. And I am not convinced that many South Africans are committed sufficiently to Africanising our culture. At this point in time it's very American or just western. And seeing that many politicians and thinkers and artists are very western orientated, they are not going to work as hard to turn round the cultural tide.

B.W. Do you think, then, that there is some self-deception, generalised self-deception, amongst South Africans who are looking forward to a freer land in that, apartheid is a concept, is a life-style, which doesn't just stop in its tracks and, although it may disappear as a term or a political ideology, that the root of it, racism, is in fact much more difficult to eradicate and a much more entrenched feature of society which politicians anywhere in the world, let alone South Africa, have little hope of extracting?

L.N. Well, yes, in those terms, definitely. There is a great deal of deception and, unfortunately, people are very much deceived by the very bitterness of the past history. Many people feel that things can only get better from now on. You see, the racism was so blatant and brutal, our people may get easily pacified with smiles and platitudes and therefore take longer to recognise the more destructive, subtle ways of racism concealed. Too grateful not to be kicked. As you say, the system may change, but the attitudes will continue to subvert all the good objectives. You see, White people in South Africa don't know how to be equal, even when they wish to be. That statement is hard, I know, but until they recognise it and look for ways of detecting their own inner feelings — a way to racism awareness —, things will continue to be hard. They expect acceptance all the time, as of right. They do not understand rejection from a Black person, one person to another. I am certain that a lot of people in the streets are hopeful; their hopes for change are great. I think many people believe that once Nelson Mandela is up at the top, these things will begin to change for the better. In fact, what I fear very seriously is that those who are going to get near the top, when faced with the kind of task before them and failing to deliver, may cause them to resort to just thinking of themselves in the end. Already they are thinking greatly of themselves; many of them are well set up long before entering parliament. You wonder where the money comes from. But I am not entering into that debate. It is not my area. It is not my concern at all, but I do know there is a lot of grumbling about people who are in a position to better themselves now. The task before them is very great and the more they will fail to fulfill, the more they will think of their wealth. "Let's sort it out and get out."

B.W. It would seem then that the economic aspect is potentially the area in which the fastest changes will take place — changes in economic attitudes and the distribution of

wealth— while changes in political or inter-racial attitudes will require more time and effort. Do you think education is the key to this latter kind of change?

L.N. Well, in fact, I think I would have put it the other way round. I would have said politically change is going to come about sooner or later; the reformed political structures are going to be established. What is really going to be the hardest factor is the economic aspect. I don't think there is any real plan in anybody's mind to hand over the South African economy to the Black masses. And of course, on the other side of the same coin, the Black masses, owing to educational deprivation and their experience, are not in a position to take over or to fight and reclaim their own space economically. However, without an improved economy there is no freedom; freedom requires that both politics and the economy are equal partners—you can't have one without the other. So that is why I maintain that education is very important. A programme of mammoth dimensions will be required for the education situation to be sorted out within a reasonable period. Money would have to be made available not only for schools from primary education up to university, but also for all those people who have missed out on education. Furthermore, this amount of money is going to be required at a time when the South African economy is struggling. I cannot say I see this happening. I think education is going to continue to struggle. If looked at broadly, I think more schools will be built. But first there is a need for qualified and capable teachers, because we must not forget that not only the children but the teachers too have suffered and in many cases they are of poor quality. During recent years, liberation for education has meant further erosion of the calibre of teachers and their morale. Many teachers don't care to teach any more—they go to school, they give children work—, but the system encourages them to get more qualifications in order to get promotion and higher wages so that many of them are struggling for themselves. So teacher training centres would have to be set up and thousands of teachers from elsewhere would have to be imported in order to upgrade those teachers already there, to change teachers' attitudes towards the children and their jobs. As for the children, no matter how ready the children are, no matter how ready the schools are, if the teachers are not ready there is no education. And then of course there is also, finally, the question of changing the children's own minds. Education is a painful process; it is not an easy, comfortable, pleasant experience. Learning is hard, and so many of the children have gone without that discipline. It is going to be very hard to get them back into education, into accepting the rigours of education.

B.W. So do you see now that there is a whole generation of late teenagers—young adults—who possibly will never get educated?

L.N. You know what I see, I see the generation that has already gone by, one for whom I advocate new types of adult education, not necessarily the classroom, but skills and all that. But I also see the child just embarking on her first year of education now. That child is going to struggle for her education the hard way because nothing will be fully in place. If we are talking of education as we understand it here, those children are going to struggle through, stumbling along to the end, but many will be still half-educated. You know, one of the things I discovered when I got to Great Britain was how narrow South

African education was in scope. Deep, but very narrow. You want an education that broadens the mind; you don't have to pass an exam to be educated. You want that kind of education. When will those children ever get that kind of education? When are all the libraries in the infants' schools, not to speak of secondary schools and universities, going to be established? In my view, therefore, the youngest children today entering school in South Africa are going to struggle through the system that is least able to accommodate their needs.

B.W. Well, Laurretta, thank you very much for this most interesting conversation.

Lleida, 21 March 1993