



# Mzansi's poets through mass media lenses

Essay by Natalia Molebatsi

Long before media houses “discovered” poets (of the post-apartheid era), a whole movement had been growing, a tapestry of rich voices woven by meaningful messages, far out of the realm (or interests) of mass media. Today, poetry is a rising phenomenon on our TV and radio channels. So much that we often have to scrutinise the criteria used in the “quest” to conscientise audiences about poetry – South Africa depends (too much) on what is dished out by mainstream media. This is caused by various factors such as the lack of a reading culture, and the inaccessibility and exclusivity of alternative media. Young people watch too much television, so it is important for those who produce poetic culture to emphasise the importance of *critical reading* as a principle – going as far as recommending literature and providing access information.

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### Recreating celebrity status

In African culture, the poet has always been a sort of “celebrity”. Within the scope of mass media, s/he is faced with the challenge of recreating this status or being faced with the limited vision of the media institution. The poet as teacher and advisor has to advocate her/his space within this framework of conformity and packaged images – while artists are there to *unpack images*. Mass media tendencies include that of framing and institutionalising even the most radical of voices. If poets don't fit this framing they are marginalised. This marginalisation however, doesn't present much of a challenge to the practice as poetry has gained a following beyond media institutions. Through a limited view, poetry or spoken word might be presented as “new” while it is actually the continuation of a tradition of praises, memories, and knowledge given to us long before today's spoken-word artist got hold of the microphone or TV slot. It is therefore up to the poet to create a continuum. If these artists are not conscious of their socio-cultural role, mass media could end up creating agendas away from the value of their texts – taking advantage of the “in thing” and the longstanding celebrated status of poets.

### Poets as journalists

Today, wordsmiths are not only made by television, they too contribute to making television. This is meaningful if their vision is not blurred or lost through the lens. Poets do not cease to make us aware that words, history, politics, (of self and of a nation), and social issues, exist interdependently. This is proven by the award-winning and outspoken Lebogang Mashile on her popular TV show *L'Attitude* where she visits (among others) the lives of ordinary women and the spaces they occupy, with creativity that weaves poetry into everyday life. There is much vision and purpose in her work. However, television can be dangerous if underlying messages of consumerism are “sold” through poets' voices. Kgafela oa Magogodi, Ntone Edjabe, and Kojo Baffoe among others, have seen poetry's underground movements rise as a force to be reckoned with, and these poets are among the creative and independent thinking producers of powerful mass media messages, both mainstream and alternative. Popular TV shows are also beginning to weave poetry into their scripts. However, the poet has to be “relevant” to the

script and this might not necessarily be true to her/his vision.

Through various channels, poets can set agendas (or so it seems) for what will contribute to serious public opinion about our state of affairs as Africans. But “who foots the bill?” might force many to censor themselves, because after all, “this one is for television,” we might say. This poses a real threat to achieved or perceived powers, as unlike any other “journalists”, spoken-word artists tend to be “too free” with their views (which are vulnerable to being captured, owned and altered for status quo and commercial purposes).

### “Style” as poetic essence

On an aesthetic level, viewers are often presented with packaged images, especially of young women. Stereotypes – of the skinny, western look – are however being broken down by images of voluptuous, “unladylike” black women with “un-relaxed” hair, contributing to a cultural revolution that is going the mainstream route. Nthabiseng Motsemme's great work on the *Politics and poetics of dress among young black women* and Napo Masheane's poems and stage play *Bum*, confirm that we are articulating our beauty and renewing our sense of style. These renewed images are commanding space through media lenses. They could however, become commercialised within a constraining capitalist framework – and out the window goes the value of culture and knowledge production. Mashile's poem *Style (is in the essence of my people)* can be misappropriated if interpreted as fashion-orientated, while she is inspiring and challenging young black women to be self loving and confident.

Therefore, poetic expression should be valued beyond corporate and media interests, and this can only happen when wordsmiths set their own agenda by allowing themselves to write and perform as a reflection of the society and personalities they live in.

### Creating representatives

Whoever makes decisions about which poetry to review or publish, should have enough insight about the concept, as South Africa is draped by a fabric of talented poets who speak on various issues (some not very desirable to newspapers and/or screens). The Lentswe Poetry Project on SABC 2 presents various poetic issues, (from known and unknown poets and in various languages) themed according to national Youth Day, Heritage Day, Women's and Valentine's day etc. These go through some evaluation by someone, and only those deemed relevant will be

### References

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in the magic box. Poets have to gear their verses to fit in. Such projects and mediums can prove positive, as long as poets are allowed to represent themselves without being trapped to conform to particular expectations and limitations. Otherwise, they face the danger of becoming imposters for profit-orientated “variety” that leave us in boxes – becoming part of the problem rather than of the solution.

**Mass media as “keepers of gates”**

In the past, black poets and their words never saw the light of day. Leading poets like Keorapetse Kgosisile and Mzwakhe Mbuli were banned because they were considered radical by the apartheid media. Today the likes of Lesego Rampolokeng and Vonani ka Bila – some of the most important voices of Mzansi’s poetry – are often not presented to the masses of poetry-lovers through mass media. These poets go beyond institutional frameworks, with words that might be too piercing to the powers that be. Poems such as “Mr President let the babies die” might never see a newspaper page or prime TV slot. Hence such artists resort to alternative media circles.

In today’s mass media-dominated society, many poets still speak from the edge. They take it upon themselves to criticise and force the powers that be to move their focus from the centre. This depends greatly on how much power poets possess to open gates for other poetic issues to flow in, with a strong refusal to fit in.

Some feel that alternative media is the answer. “Leave mainstream media to do their thing, we’ll do

ours”. But why not penetrate both? There is no doubt that poetry has enticed the appetites of mainstream viewers. Therefore more space is required for expressing these voices. Those who uncompromisingly created their own space – such as the acclaimed feelah sistah collective and Uju – commanded media attention, both mainstream and alternative. Alternative media remains safer though: *Chimurenga*, *Botsotso*, *Timbila’s Journal of Union Skin Poetry* and *BKO* magazine are some of the few representative pages for poets, where toning down to fit in doesn’t exist. These publications are consciously seeking and retaining audiences in places often not penetrated by mainstream media. Poets are also creating websites and blogs. But these remain out of reach for ordinary, unemployed youth in Tembisa or Gugulethu. Internet access, literature through public libraries and book stores remain a scarcity for many people. It is thus up to the poet to raise awareness on such issues through mass media channels in order to help transform poor, yet highly-consumerised, minds and communities.

**Concluding thoughts**

Never before have we seen so much poetry through mass media lenses. This is affirming but can become misappropriated if commercialised. Viewers can be bombarded with poetic images to the extent where they stop wondering and exploring other voices outside the box, because it might seem as if the revolution is televised!

Like the shaman, the poet has always held a crucial position as teacher among our people – and this will not cease. It is therefore the poet’s duty (even at the hands of mass media) not to become a consumer item or “anybody’s official poet or puppet” as Kgafela oa Magogodi’s poem states. It is not easy though, as many have tried but failed, simply because someone else covers production costs.

Every poet – especially those seen as celebrities and “representatives” – is (or should be) politicised in their message, be it about black women’s bodies and space, language, poverty/Aids or about opposing politicians. In this manner, mass media channels can be made (for the first time) to work for and not against us.

