



by Sarita Ranchod

# AFRICAN STORY

The story of the African people is a fight against subordination, domination and oppression. It is about battles for freedom – freedom from domination, imperialism, freedom to be, to choose. It is a celebration of survival. And in surviving, there is a story of sustaining – of holding on to a value system, of holding on to ways of life, ways of healing, ways of communing that respect life, that respect the earth and the soul. It is a story of victory of good over evil.

That great African philosopher, Bob Marley says “half the story has never been told”, and in the context of telling the African story, Marley’s words ring true. In South Africa, do our children know the stories of slavery and the victorious battles for freedom from slavery, of torture? Do they know of the battles against colonialism fought by their forebears? And do they know the more recent **stories of victories of good over evil?**

Our African stories need to be told, celebrated. Told in ways that reach all of us so that we can all share in celebrating where we come from. Our stories need to be told in languages we understand, crossing barriers of literacy. How are our media telling our stories? And whose stories are we telling? Why do we tell those? How do we choose whose story is more important, more valid, more newsworthy?

If the role of the media is to inform and educate, what do we know of the region we live in, the countries beyond South Africa’s borders? Aside from economic interest stories (often linked to natural resource extraction), stories on the HIV situation, and the odd tourism story, what do we know of our neighbours? And, through whose eyes are these stories told? **We need to get to know our country, our region, our continent, our peoples, our stories – African stories.**

If we compare media output originating from and about our continent and its peoples (including film, publishing, newspapers, broadcast media and the Internet) with that of Europe and the United States, we begin to get a picture of how **half the story has never been told.** We continue to occupy disproportionately little space – including media space.

We cannot solve our problems outside of the processes and structures that shape our contemporary world. That would exclude us more, make us even more marginal. By its structure and nature the global status quo is in opposition to notions of a fair and equal world for all – rich and poor. African media in particular have a responsibility to **stop insulating the rich from the poor.** We cannot ignore the reality of income poverty that surrounds us. We cannot ignore the legacy of under-development and the huge challenges that these backlogs in development cause. We cannot perpetuate the continuing marginalisation of the economic haves from the economic have-nots. I would argue that responsible media claiming a public interest have a moral imperative to actively question and challenge the morality of existing global trade, financial and investment regimes in

advocacy organisations and activists? Do the media have a role to play in changing our world? Or do we merely report on what we see?

Thabo Mbeki has commented that **the African intelligentsia** does not have the luxury of merely interpreting the world; we need to do something to change it. I would argue that as media practitioners, as Africans, we have a moral responsibility to use our skills and capacities to change the shape of the world to one that benefits all its people. From where I sit, that is what the struggle for liberation from oppression and the resultant transformation process is about. And when it comes to the media, as in other spheres, we are barely at the beginning of that process of fundamental transformation.

The image we have been fed of our continent from time immemorial is the colonial and racist view that is contemptuous of things African – that associates Africa with war, disease and famine. How much has that view changed in 2003?

When I speak of telling the African story, I refer to a fundamental transformation – one in which we are all conscious and active participants. One we define and lead, as Africans. Consciously and actively shifting the gaze, defining and leading the future of our local and our global realities **to ensure real and lasting global peace and freedom from want in a world of excess.**

At this point in our global history and in the history of the world's media – where sensationalism and simplification seems to be the order of the day, there is real need for intelligent, **out-of-the-box**, African media – media inspired with new vision, by new visionaries able to grapple with complexity, differing and competing interests, values, desires. Media located in a multi-cultural African reality, able to grapple with the paradox of our two-nation state, able to reflect and change all the time. Media able to define and locate themselves within a global and a local community/world, that grapples with our position and our interests within a unipolar, imperialist cultural paradigm focused on consumption. Media able to recognise that they are not benign in this project.

Media scholar, Peter Kareithi aptly argues: **“Consumerism, not Christianity, is the religion of this latest phase of imperialism, and global media are its missionaries.”** Given this global context, what is the role of African media? If our role is to forward the consumption project, whose interests are we furthering? And are those interests really what is best for the African public interest, or indeed for the global public interest?

In engaging with the training and education for transformation debate, the obvious question is transformation from what, to what? Is there an assumed standard to which we should aspire, and what is that standard? Further, who sets the standards? Our current reality is one that has not existed before. And so, there are no experts in how to do this thing we are trying to do. **We do not want to replace THE media that did not serve the public interest (certainly not the whole public) with others that serve the same old interests plus that of an emerging black bourgeoisie.** This kind of transformation is dishonest and a quick fix that will not sustain in the long-term. It deals with change by promoting a few

black editors, ensuring a few blacks are in positions of authority. It views the new black bourgeoisie as a potential market – **a market to target, a market with money.** This market-based transformation is not transformation. It is merely a strategy to take cognisance of shifting market realities. Cashing in on new market realities and the transformation imperative are different things.

As African media, engaging with transformation on a local and global scale, the primacy of the US/European (economic interest) perspective in how the world is reported, reflected, valued in the news and how the media are effectively being used as a tool for reflecting that unipolar global order should be cause for great concern and debate. Where is this debate? The silence is deafening. Does the silence suggest complicity, disinterest... what does media silence mean?

**We live in a time of possibility, of achieving the impossible. We have at our disposal the tools and the implements to create a better, more equitable world.** We live in a country that many in the rest of the world are looking to for guidance in finding a socially-just way forward. Within these debates, there is an assumption that democracy equals capitalism.

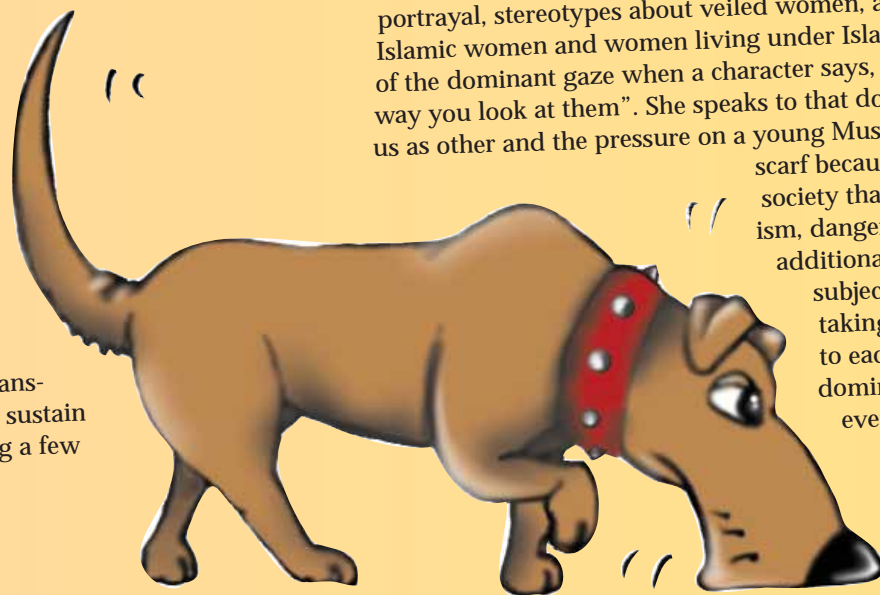
The democracy-equals-capitalism given does not allow much space for manoeuvre in relation to the fundamentals. **And so as thinkers and creators we are left with the space in between. And with that space in between, we need to bring the margin to the centre. Make the periphery central. Insert our voices, our views.**

The views of the economic South; the voices, views and interests of the peoples of the world who have been colonised and dominated for centuries – the new, free voices. This is the essence of telling the African story – and a few notable African thinkers are putting their hearts, minds to work and bringing those marginal voices to the fore. Some of these young Africans giving meaning and texture to the African Renaissance include playwrights Xoli Norman and Nadia Davids – young Africans taking up the challenge to tell their stories, adding their voices, challenging the dominant gaze, occupying space until very recently denied them. And in speaking, in voicing their truths, challenging, and sometimes subverting the dominant gaze. And so, there is hope.

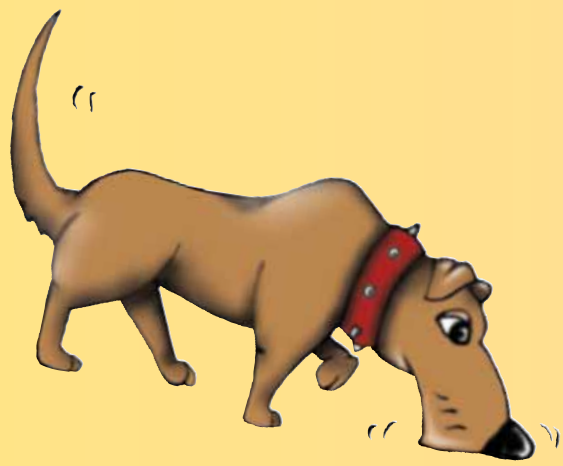
Davids' play, *At Her Feet* engages with the experiences of contemporary Muslim women in different contexts, taking up issues of media representation, portrayal, stereotypes about veiled women, and perceptions of the rights of Islamic women and women living under Islamic law. Davids speaks to the issue of the dominant gaze when a character says, “I don't want you looking at me the way you look at them”. She speaks to that dominant gaze – the them who look at us as other and the pressure on a young Muslim woman torn between wearing a

scarf because she wants to, and living in a society that equates veiled women with terrorism, dangerous, other. Davids' line raises an additional issue. Who do we, the post-colonial subjects, the object of study for so long, in taking up space, address? Are we speaking to each other, or do we speak back to the dominant gaze? Do we maintain the centre even in challenging that centre?

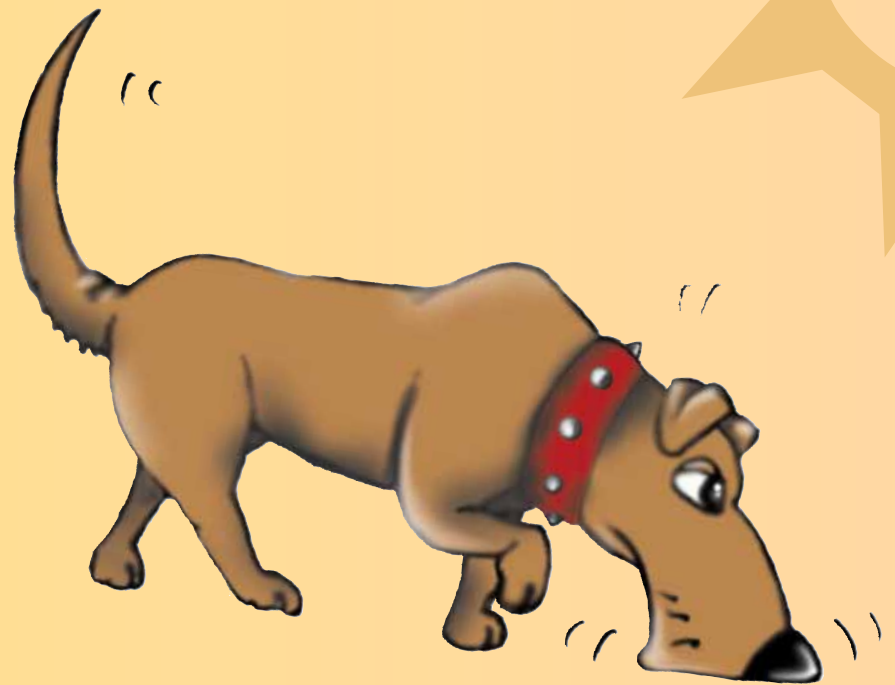
**We need to witness power shifts in the media,** not only in staffing and recruitment practices, but in content. We



Turn over for more...



With a nose for news, Watcher, the Newshound helps Di Versity sniff out a good story. He also has the knack of digging up dirt when needed. The evil team is seldom safe when Di and her dog are on the prowl.



need to build a new base of South Africans; Africans who know their continent, know their stories, know the stories of how their stories were kept from being told, deliberately silenced. And now, as we approach **10 years of freedom** we have the opportunity to creatively and critically engage in dialogue like we never have before. We have the opportunity to exercise our freedom, to work for the dream of a united Africa, to tell our stories, to create African media with African hearts and minds.

We need to move away from the sustaining world view that places Africa as the dependant, and the recipient of charity, to an Africa that creates, shares, tells Africa's stories – through the media, through theatre, by writing, by speaking up, rising up, making our voices heard, putting ourselves at the centre, never to return to the periphery.

The stories of Africa and the African diaspora are ones of paradox. Of living in a world of opportunity that favours the developed world through trade and other regimes designed to benefit the few. Of living outside of those systems of benefit; living in places of rich natural wealth, rich heritage; in economic poverty. **And yet, we are free. Free from domination.**

We come from a culture that has challenged domination. Why are we so silent now on global domination – apartheid on a global scale? Have we been cornered, nowhere to turn, or is there space for manoeuvre? Are we at the mercy of circumstances that define our future? Are we merely conduits? We need to take up our space. Occupy space. Space that as Africans we have historically been denied.

Next year South Africa celebrates 10 years of freedom. In the same year, **Haiti celebrates 200 years of being the first independent Black Republic.** An important time to reflect on where we have come from and where we are going for African peoples on this continent and in the diaspora.

Given our history and the point at which we find ourselves now – celebrating African freedom from adversity – we have the possibility to shape new media, media that are fundamentally different from the media of our past – in values and sentiment.

We have a responsibility to our hard-won freedom. That responsibility does not allow for complacency or apathy. No

matter the colour of your skin, the African Century is the business of all Africans. **We come from different experiences, and newsroom cultures and values need to reflect this difference and diversity, not silence it, or force it to fit old moulds. The old moulds are no longer valid. You have pressed an incorrect key.**

My first official newsroom experience was as a journalist intern at a large Johannesburg daily. The process of newsgathering was a mystery to me. My previous, less official experiences had been in student newspapers. Newsgathering in the student media was a different story. A collective process. The responsibility of chairing a newsgathering process rotated. This sharing of responsibility built leadership, skills and confidence. Newsgathering was open to ideas, suggestion – a space in which all voices got to speak. Not only did everyone speak but also, if a particular journalist was interested in following a particular story, they followed that story.

At my Johannesburg daily, a few senior members of staff disappeared to conference twice a day. After some time I realised that conference was where stories were decided and assigned by management. When would I have the opportunity to share my story ideas? I remember approaching the news editor with story ideas. He was surprised – I'm not sure how many journalists, least of all a student, had come up with their own story ideas in that newsroom. The prevailing newsroom structure did not enable space for participation in the news agenda.

There was no way those in management were going to have the same story ideas I had. **Our realities were different.** Our journeys, routes (even to the office) and roots were different. Our experiences were different. And we needed to bridge that gap. Their response to my initiative was to offer me a job. I was not interested. And perhaps if I had been I might have had a shot at changing a newsroom culture and style that was established, tried and tested, but didn't work for me. It didn't encourage fresh thinking, there was no space for sharing and challenging, learning from each other by talking; no space for different perspectives and experiences. The existing newsroom culture did not give me a sense that my experiences, the place from which I came, my individuality would be valued.

The process of gathering news then was an experience open only to a few. I don't doubt that the management in question simply had not thought to include others. Processes and people who exclude rarely set out to exclude. I can see the reasoning for allowing



management to determine the news agenda. It's simply more efficient. But is it smart, creative, out-of-the-box? Or is it same-old-same-old? Exclusive processes do not lead to a sense of ownership. And we don't need a business degree to know the positive benefits of a sense of ownership.

I wonder now, 10 years down the line, has that newspaper's newsgathering approach changed? I hope so. Newsgathering can be a creative and empowering process. It can build skills and confidence. It can generate fresh ideas, critical thinking, it can inspire creativity, the voicing of different points of views. Quite simply, it can be an eye-opening experience, just listening to each other – **not listening to the usual people.**

Opening up the process opens up space for a diversity of stories from a variety of points of view, not just what management thinks would be a good story, written from an angle that management thinks is best.

Media can bridge gaps by fostering communication and dialogue like nothing else can. And at a time in our world, where we seek to restore dignity, to honour and celebrate all our journeys (in our institutional practices and our content), media in all their forms have the opportunity to be a part of bridging this gap.

Commercial media and student media are quite different. Nevertheless, lessons can be learnt from student media. Lessons about building inclusivity, participation, ownership, changing and challenging old ways of doing things; ways that do not necessarily work for a new reality.

In the Sanef Skills Audit, newsroom management styles came up for critical scrutiny. **South Africa is a different country to what it was 10 years ago.** And newsrooms need to reflect that – not simply by how many black and female faces make up our teams and are sourced in our media, but also in how we work

Newsgathering is an opportunity to foster participation, inclusion, ownership and diversity of views. Try to involve everybody. Just once. See what happens! What makes us unique in this bland world? Our localness, not our McDonalds-ness. The only way to compete in this global world is to be the best of what we are, not to ape the developed world. Our needs and realities are different, and our media serve a very different audience and reality. The complexity of our South African-ness, the multiplicity of the identities that every one of us walks around with and occupies in every moment of our being, our hybridity – that is what makes us unique.

What is the role of media in the African Century?

**Celebration – to open up spaces for conversation/dialogue** between people who have historically not spoken to each other. To create our own history by communicating with each other, listening to each other, recording our stories, reading each other. And what better tool to foster that dialogue than media?

Telling our stories, from our point of view – we have been the object of study for long enough. African stories through African eyes that place us at the centre of our stories, our histories, our future.

Opportunity – we have an opportunity to create something new – to be both architects and builders of new African media, that critically engage with a complex local and global reality. That value their locality, give voice to a multiplicity of voices – rich/poor, woman/man, educated/illiterate. Media that reflect the creativity of peoples, a continent. Not a clone of a foreign reality. A home brew – through African eyes, hearts, minds.

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