



# Protest against social inequalities in B.W. Vilakazi's poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi " ("Because ... you now say")

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## Abstract

**Protest against social inequalities in B.W. Vilakazi's poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi " ("Because ... you now say")**

*Long before the National Party institutionalised apartheid in 1948, individuals and organisations tried to highlight the injustices of the colonial capitalist system in South Africa, but, as Lodge (1983:6) puts it, "it all ended in speeches". This article seeks to demonstrate how Benedict Wallet Vilakazi effectively broke the silence by bringing the plight of the black masses to the attention of the world. He strongly protested against the enslavement of black labourers, especially in the gold and diamond mines, that he depicts as responsible for the human, psychological and physical destruction of the black working classes. As a self-appointed spokesperson of the oppressed, he protested against the injustices through the medium of his poetry. One of his grave concerns was the fact that black workers had been reduced to a class with no name, no rights, practically with no life and no soul. The chosen poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi" (Because ... you now say) is thus representative of the poems in which B.W Vilakazi externalised his commitment to the well-being of the black workers, and his protest against the insensitivity of white employers.*

## Opsomming

**Protes teen sosiale ongelykheid in B.W. Vilakazi se gedig "Ngoba ... sewuthi" ("Want ... nou sê jy")**

*Lank voor die Nasionale Party apartheid na 1948 geïnstitusionaliseer het, het individue en organisasies probeer om die onregverdighede*

*van die koloniale kapitalistiese sisteem in Suid-Afrika na vore te bring, maar soos Lodge (1983-1986) dit stel, "it all ended in speeches". Hierdie artikel toon aan hoe Benedict Wallet Vilakazi die stilte doeltreffend verbreek het deur die lot van die swart massas onder die aandag van die wêreld te bring. Hy het heftig protes aangeteken omdat swart arbeiders soos slawe behandel is in veral die goud- en diamantmyne, wat hy uitbeeld as die instansies wat verantwoordelik was vir die menslike, sielkundige en fisieke vernietiging van die swart werkersklas. As 'n selfaangestelde woordvoerder van die onderdrukte het hy deur medium van sy poësie beswaar gemaak teen die onregverdighede. Een van die dinge waaroor hy veral besorgd was, was die feit dat swart werkers gereduseer is tot 'n klas sonder naam, sonder regte – 'n klas wat prakties geen lewe en siel gehad het nie. Die gekose gedig "Ngoba ... Sewuthi" (Want ... nou sê jy) is dus verteenwoordigend van die gedigte waarin B.W Vilakazi sy betrokkenheid by die welsyn van die swart werkers en sy protes teen die ongevoeligheid van wit werkgewers uitgedruk het.*

## **1. Introduction**

B.W Vilakazi's Zulu poetry, published in two volumes (1935 and 1945), became world famous through its 1973 English translation by Malcolm and Friedman. Even Vilakazi's earliest critics acknowledged that his poetry constituted a definite departure from the Zulu poetic tradition, which had excelled in praise poetry about kings and heroes, although it had also found expression in melic and romantic poetry, especially in the accompaniment of love songs and other types of rhythmic music. Determined to demonstrate the boundless possibilities of the Zulu language and literary traditions, Vilakazi concerned himself with all kinds of subjects ranging from historical to purely romantic themes. The more he tried to penetrate the soul of his people, the more he became aware of their sufferings under the injustices inflicted by a colonial government. Colonial governments represented the interests of white capitalists who often only aimed at personal enrichment, and did not care about the social development of the black population that was living in a state of servitude in its own land, deprived of any human rights. This situation led to Vilakazi's deeply felt protest poetry.

Like his contemporary, H.I.E. Dhlomo, the subject of Vilakazi's protest poems were mainly the inhuman conditions of mine workers. Both his Zulu roots in the *ubuntu* philosophy and his Christian education at St. Francis College, a Catholic Missionary school at Mariannhill, KwaZulu-Natal, made him aware that human beings need to be treated with dignity, regardless of race and class. He felt that this basic human principle was grossly trampled upon by

colonial and capitalist systems that had befallen the black populations of Africa at the same time. The social conflict highlighted in his poetry is expressed in terms of race, culture and class. He shows social commitment as he reflects on the deep pain of the African, thrown into a world he does not understand and for which he has no love, because it disrupts his way of life and ignores his culture. As noted by Jones and Jones (1996:121), "commitment emanates from a positive but pained state of mind, suffering, sacrifice, selflessness, determination to defy misery and triumph over travails – given life through action". Vilakazi is concerned with the need to protect innocent victims of such plagues as racism, repression, oppression and exploitation. Commenting on the message in Vilakazi's poetry, Killam and Rowe (2000) point out that the underlying message is always presented in an uncompromising fashion.

The English translations used in this article are based on the original Zulu text, but with an eye on Malcolm and Friedman's (1962) and Friedman's (1973) rendition, where appropriate.

## **2. Context: Social commitment and protest**

True poetry springs from the depths of the human soul as it is moved by contemplation, joy, love or suffering. The contemplation could be of a purely personal nature, or indicating a share in the life-force of the world celebrated in the achievements, or suffered for in the pains of mankind. In countries like South Africa prior to 1994, one could distinguish two categories of socially concerned poets: those poets who used their art to legitimise, uphold and advance the *status quo*, and those who used their talent to challenge the ruling class and to champion the cause of the oppressed (Amuta, 1989). Vilakazi falls within the latter category. In the chosen poem, he articulates the depth and breadth of the suffering borne by mine workers.

Vilakazi was not a political revolutionary involved in noisy demonstrations that could bring to the fore the injustices inflicted on his people. He, however, hoped his poetry would serve as an instrument of protest to eventually conscientise employers. His experience of township life in Johannesburg and the way black miners were treated prompted him towards his chosen medium (Gérard, 1971:249).

Before World War II, the colonial system dominated most of Africa. Several of Vilakazi's poems thus illustrate the dark side of

colonialism and unbridled capitalism by highlighting the destructive consequences on the African people who were exploited and had no voice. Vilakazi, like other committed poets strongly believed that human respect and freedom were inalienable rights, just as the need to breathe, eat or sleep (Amuta, 1989:179).

In addition to the poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi", elements of protest against the *status quo* lie scattered in most of Vilakazi's work. In "NgePhasika" (The Passover) the poet recalls how Jesus came to Africa, in Egypt, when he was persecuted by king Herod. He did not come to conquer and enrich himself, as many of his white Christian followers do now, but he came as a poor persecuted homeless immigrant. Jesus can therefore understand the plight of the black populations. In "Woza Nonjinjikazi" (Come, monster of steel), Vilakazi attacks the train for destroying family life by taking away the men to seek work in unknown places, to hide them in mines that burrow deep into the bowels of the earth. The train is like the traditional all-devouring monster of Zulu folklore that eats and destroys everything on its path. Similar themes depicting the plight of disinherited African workers are found in "Khalani MaZulu" (Weep, you, Zulus) and "U-Aggrey weAfrika" (Aggrey of Africa), all from the first collection, *Inkondlo KaZulu* (1935). In the later collection, *Amal'Ezulu* (1945), we find elements of even stronger protest. Suffice it to mention poems such as "Inyanga" (The moon), "Imfundo ephakeme" (Higher education), "Wo Ngitshele Mntanomlungu" (Tell me white man's child). The long and heart-rending poem "Ezinkomponi" (On the gold mine compounds) has become a classic that describes the de-humanising conditions in which black miners had to live and work. These poems clearly illustrate that Vilakazi did not cut himself off from his own people, although he was privileged to work in the ivory tower of Wits University, but that he was indeed concerned with the nefarious consequences of industrialisation on the poorer black classes.

In the poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi" (Because ... you now say) Vilakazi challenges the industrialisation and consequent urbanisation of Africans, because these processes reduce blacks to a faceless, soulless and anonymous class. This perception is often expressed in his criticism of mine work, which entails descending underground, into the bowels of the earth. Traditional Zulu cosmology regards the surface of the earth as the dividing line between the world of the living and that of the living-dead. Underground work is equivalent to being buried, therefore to being dead, to becoming a shade. This state is acceptable if one has lived a full life, and can look forward to

remaining an important part of one's family as an *idlozi*, or protecting ancestor. If one is, however, buried in a place unknown by one's family, one cannot exercise one's protective influence and is condemned to being forgotten, cancelled out of one's family's memory.

Employers are often perceived as only concerned with profit, at whatever physical, psychological or social cost to their employees. It is natural that such an outlook could explode into class conflict, with interest groups banding together to defend their rights against any opponent. Class struggle thus becomes a central feature in this poem, although it is not expressed in Marxist terms.

In the African world the poet, as a man of culture; someone who devotes his art and life to the pursuit of justice and freedom, is traditionally given the freedom to criticise even a powerful ruler. Vilakazi felt the call to become part of this poetic undertaking, and to represent and bring to the fore the problems, feelings and sufferings of his people. One must acknowledge the fact that during the last 50 or 60 years also a number of white writers vigorously took up the cause of the African oppressed masses, because they cared deeply for justice and humanity, thus unequivocally taking a stand against the apartheid state. One may mention, among others, Alan Paton who, in his ground-breaking novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), relates to the world the conditions under which the black people of South Africa lived under white rule (Chapman, 1996). Nadine Gordimer, the novelist, also wrote on similar themes. These writers addressed the harshness and desolation experienced by black South Africans in a white controlled country as a result of urbanisation and race discrimination. Through literary works they explored the central social and political dilemmas of South Africa in great depth, detail, and with great passion.

### 3. Text of the poem "Ngoba ... sewuthi"

- 1 Ngoba ngimamatheka njalo,  
Ngikhombisa nokwenama,  
Ngihlabelela ngephimbo,  
Nom'ungifak'emgodini
- 5 Ngaphansi kwezinganeko  
Zamatsh'aluhlaz'omhlaba-  
Sewuthi nginjengensika
- 8 Yon'engezwa nabuhlungu.

(Because I always smile  
And even look happy,

Singing at the top of my voice,  
Even when you push me into a hole  
Under those mysterious  
Blue/green stones of the earth -  
You then say that I am like a pole/post  
That can't feel any pain)

- 9 Ngob'umlomo wam'uhleka,  
10 Namehl'am'ebheke phansi;  
Ngifingqe ngabek'idolo,  
Nezinwele sezimpofu  
Zigcwel'uthuli lomgwaqo,  
Ngipheth'ipiki ngesandla,  
15 Neyemb'elingenamhlane-  
Sewuthi nginjengedwala  
17 Lon'elingakwaz'ukufa.

(Because I laugh with my mouth,  
And my eyes are cast down;  
My trousers rolled above the knee,  
My hair like ochre  
matted with the dust of the road,  
My hand holding a pick,  
Although my shirt is backless;  
You say that I am like a rock  
That doesn't know even [the pains of] death.)

- 18 Ngoba njalo ngakusihlwa  
Sengigumul'iketango  
20 Lomsebenz'onzim' emini,  
Ngihlangana nabakithi  
Siyogadlela ngendlamu,  
Singoma ngamadala  
Asikizelis'igazi,  
25 Kuphele nokukhathala-  
Sewuthi ngiyisilwane  
27 Esifa kuzalw'esinye.

(Because normally in the evenings  
I let loose of the chains  
Of the daily heavy work,  
And meeting people of my kind  
We dance with newly-found energy  
And sing our traditional songs  
That stir up our blood  
And chase away our weariness;  
You say that I am an animal  
Which, should it die, it's readily replaced.)

- 28 Ngoba ngiwumgquphane,  
 Ngibulawa ukungazi,  
 30 Ngingaqondi namithetho,  
 Kodwa ngizwa ingiphanga;  
 Nendlu yami ngiyibeke  
 Ngaphansi kweziwa zetshe;  
 Utshani buyindlu yami,  
 35 Isaka liyisivatho –  
 Sewuthi ngiyisiduli,  
 Kanginalo nonyembezi  
 Olucons' enhliziyweni  
 Luwel'ezandleni'ezinhle  
 40 Zamadloz'abuka konke.

(Because I am a simple dupe  
 Destroyed by the price of ignorance;  
 As I don't understand any laws,  
 But can only feel when they hurt me;  
 Because I make my home  
 Under a rocky krantz;  
 And cover it with grass thatch,  
 And myself with sack-cloth;  
 You think that I am a deaf-mute  
 That I have not a tear  
 That may fall from my heart  
 On those beautiful hands  
 Of my ancestors who see everything.)

### 3.1 Structure of the poem

This is a short poem composed of only 40 lines, divided into four unequal stanzas of 8, 9, 10 and 13 lines respectively. The composition sounds like a dialogue by which the poet, who impersonates the black worker, explains what he does, and then interprets the way the employer will judge the action. Each stanza is characterised by an image of the workers that *the employer* has formed, followed by the *poet's interpretation* of the situation, aiming to show the falsity of such an image. The white employer is addressed as *wena* (you) in *se-wu-thi* (*You now say*). The poet attempts to open the employer's eyes to the true situation of his black mine employees. "Because we do, or we look like, or we show such external behaviour, *you think* we are ... *but we are not!*"

The first image to be commented on is *Ngimamatheka njalo* (I am always smiling broadly) and *Ngikhombisa nokwenama* (I even show signs of happiness). This exterior ability to make the most of a painful situation lets the employer characterise the black worker as

"Insika" (a pole or a post). The Zulu rondavel is supported by a central pole that silently witnesses all the family joys and sorrows, but is taken for granted by all and sundry. In the same way, gate posts or fence posts are silent witnesses to everything that is going on. The poet suggests that black workers are de-personalised, treated as sheer numbers, as if they were not there, with no feelings or needs, because of their tendency to show a smiling face even when their hearts are bleeding.

In the second stanza the poet returns to the smiling face (*Umlomo wam'uhleka* – My mouth is constantly smiling) and the respectful attitude of the black worker (*Nomehl'am'ebheke phansi* – And my eyes are cast down), interpreted by the employer as signs of acceptance of any kind of treatment, of lack of feelings, of stoic endurance, like that of a stone (*Nginjengedwala* – I am like a rock). The worker's seeming happiness makes the employer think that the worker will be contented with whatever he is given, even a backless shirt (*Neyemb'elingenamhlane*). Hard work is not rewarded with better living conditions, because the worker is as durable and as insensitive as a rock.

In the third stanza the level of the imagery is raised: from inanimate things (pole, rock) to a living animal (*Isilwane*). The image of an animal is, however, utilised because, if it dies, it is not mourned by anybody and can be readily replaced (*Esifa kuzalw'esinye* – If one dies, another is born to take its place). The African worker is like a pack animal, and yet he is capable of enjoying himself in the evenings, when he can forget the chains of his servitude, give voice to his *joie de vivre*, sing his traditional songs and dance to the tunes of home.

The image in the last stanza is that of a human being who is not considered as human: *Ngiyisiduli* (I am a deaf-dumb person<sup>1</sup>) and *Ngiumngquphane* (a simple dupe), *Ngibulawa ukungazi* (I am destroyed by not knowing). In Zulu traditional life any handicapped person was seen as possibly possessing superior magical powers, and was thus accorded suspicious respect, born out of fear for the unknown. A deaf and dumb person, however, since he could not share in any social event, was unable to hear and to speak, was considered stupid and sub-human, a dupe incapable to look after

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1 We prefer the translation of *Ngiyisiduli* as "a deaf-dumb person" to that of Friedman and Ntuli who translate this word with "ant heap".



himself. The black worker can be taken advantage of because he does not know the laws governing his conditions of employment; and he does not understand them because he does not know the language. His situation is therefore desperate. He can only rely on the ancestors whom he knows see everything that happens to him, gather his tears in their loving hands, and will one day come to his rescue.

The central images of each stanza illustrate that Vilakazi makes use of progressive poetic imagery, from inanimate to human, evocative of the traditional culture of which his poetry is an expression. The progression in imagery simultaneously highlights a progression in the depth of feelings.

Imagery can be described as a reference to or a description of something concrete by means of which the author wishes to express something else that is linked to it. What is being alluded to, can be something concrete, perceived by the senses, or something abstract. Using well-known and often striking imagery creates a clear impression of what is being said.

### 3.2 Analysis

This specific poem could be called the heart-rending lament of the black mine worker, expressed in powerful images and striking language. Discussing the language of poetry, Cope (1968:24) explains:

Poetry uses language in a special way for a special purpose. The unreal formality is achieved by the use of repetition in various guises, such as alliteration, and rhyme, and the unusual concentration and emotional effect by the use of imagery reinforced by repetition.

The four stanzas of which “Ngoba ... sewuthi” consists begin in a striking way. One usually begins a sentence with *Ngoba* (because) only when responding to something stated earlier. In this poem the poet makes a statement, rebuts a damning accusation in the first line, and extends it in the second (and sometimes the following) line. He explains and reinforces the image throughout the stanza in order to highlight how readily and superficially the employer can get a completely wrong impression, which is specified in the sharp contrast expressed in the last two lines. The following illustrative examples are given in English for brevity.

### **Stanza 1**

I am always smiling, and look happy, and sing with a full voice  
(lines 1-3);

Even though you push me underground to dig up those  
mysterious stones (4-6);

*You think* I am like a pole, insensitive to pain (7-8)

### **Stanza 2**

My lips smile and my eyes are respectfully cast down (9-10);

Even though my trousers are rolled up, my hair is caked with  
dust, I wear a backless shirt while doing a back-breaking work  
with a pick (11-15);

*You say* that I am like a durable, indestructible and insensitive  
rock (16-17).

### **Stanza 3**

In the evenings I feel free and relax (18-20);

I meet my own kind, sing and dance our home songs with zest,  
trying to forget the daily toils (21-24);

*You say* I am a pack animal, easily replaced if I die (25-26).

### **Stanza 4**

I am a simpleton, enslaved by the white man's unintelligible  
laws, which hurt rather than protect me (27-30);

I am unsophisticated in my dwelling: in rock caves, under grass  
thatch; in my attire, satisfied even with a sack-cloth (31-34);

*You think* that I am an insensitive deaf-mute; that my heart feels  
no pain and my eyes have no tears (35-38);

*But* my tears fall into the loving hands of the ancestors, who see  
everything that happens to me (39-40).

The poem seems to underline the differences between external appearance and intimate inner feelings. Black people, uprooted from their traditional way of life and forced to work for money in an economic system which they do not understand, are pushed into the industrialised world to support their families. The work is hard, the situation is soul-less, but they must put on a smiling face, or put on

an act, which will help them forget the meaningless situation of loneliness, uselessness, or of being used by merciless employers, in order to survive. The white man, who observes these attempts from a distance, without allowing himself to descend into the heart of his employees, interprets such exterior signs of vitality as signs of happiness, or of an utter inability to feel pain. Mis-communication, due to differences in language, culture, tradition and class, inevitably leads to suspicion, incomprehension and eventually to class conflict.

The worker makes an effort to overcome his pain and frustration, especially by doing what he does best: by singing and dancing. The poet says:

<i>Ngihlabelela ngephimbo</i>	(I sing with a full voice);
<i>Siyogadlela ngengoma</i>	(We dance with great zest)
<i>Singoma ngamadala</i>	(We sing traditional songs)
<i>'Ngihlabelela ngephimbo'</i>	(I sing with a full voice): this expression in Zulu means that black workers sing well, with powerful voices and full hearts. The black workers thus sing in spite of being pushed underground to do humiliating work that is similar to being dead.

*Nom' ungifak' emgodini*  
*Ngaphansi kwezinganeko*  
*Zamatsh'aluhlaz'omhlaba*

(Even when you drive me underground  
Underneath the earth  
Of diamonds tinting the earth with blue)

The characteristic gift for music is found in many other African cultures as illustrated by Germbeeyi Adali-Mortty (Beier, 1967:3). For example, comments on the Ewe, the people from the Ewe land, who, unlike their neighbouring countries, although they lack mineral resources such as gold and diamonds, use their voices in beautiful singing to escape from the thought of poverty. This is their extraordinary gift: they employ music, drumming and dancing to survive with such good humour and optimism in the face of hardship.

Unfortunately, just as the mine magnates in South Africa failed to understand why the black man showed a cheerful face at all times, white rule lacked the ability to see beyond this "cheerfulness". This

is a matter of cultural awareness. Vilakazi is referring specifically to mine work that is done accompanied with music. The black miners find themselves exploited. They work hard and yet are not treated fairly. Mine work does not provide security, and workers are often involved in fatal accidents for which they are not properly compensated by the employers. Mine workers must risk their lives for meagre wages. Cassiem (1988:9), commenting on these lines, writes:

The poet describes the oppression of the black man at the hand of the rich mining magnates ... Because of the black man's ability and tradition to sing, the owners of the means of production treat him as a pole, which has no feelings.

In the second stanza, instead of simply saying *Ngoba ngiyahleka* (because I laugh), the poet chooses to say *ngob'umlomo wam'-uhleka* (because my mouth keeps on laughing). This compositional technique accentuates the rhythm of the line, which leads the performer to chant rather than to recite the poem, as is common practice in a traditional performance. The light singing rhythm leads one to take lightly the state of affairs.

We further find in the poem a mention of the Zulu custom of not looking an adult, or a superior, in the eye while talking to him: *Namehlo am'ebheke phansi* (and my eyes are cast down). A child who looks straight into the eyes of an adult (in Zulu this is called *ukugqolozela*) is considered uncouth and uneducated (*aka-fundisiwe*). This attitude of eyes being cast down shows humility and respect for one's seniors. Uninformed whites, however, interpret the custom as representative of slyness and trickery.

In the third stanza the poet has utilized the word *ingoma* (royal song, dance song) as a verb, *singoma* (we sing), rather than as a noun, which is its more common usage. *Ingoma* describes a song for special occasions, such as the first fruit ceremony, singing in the presence of a king, or at a solemn church assembly. Here it means that, when the workers get together in the evening, it is a great occasion to sing and to dance, and not just a simple pastime of little resonance. In this way the level of imagery and symbolism as dictated by the lived experience of the poet can emerge in all its fullness (Jones, Palmer & Jones, 1988).

The conditions of the worker are likened to those of a slave, as he is said to shed his *iketango* (chain) when he relaxes in the evening. The image has direct allusions to slavery and is descriptive of the

feelings of the workers: their working conditions are harsh, and the treatment they receive is inhuman. They must get used to filth ("hair as dirty as ochre"), to undignified conditions for a proud Zulu male ("rolled up trousers" and "backless shirt"): truly sub-human conditions. They cannot free themselves and depend entirely on their master. The image of a chain is given such a forceful charge within the context that it reaches down in its resonance to the deeper layer of the poet's fundamental intuition (Jones *et al.*, 1988).

The metaphors, similes and personifications employed (the worker is an *idwala* (rock), *insika* (pole), *isilwane* (animal), is *isiduli* (deaf-dumb or regarded as ant heap), draw the reader's attention to the magnitude of the problem. This problem includes various facets, inter alia the de-humanising consequence of underground work and the reduction of workers to mere numbers, used for the production of somebody else's wealth. In this way workers, who are human beings, become inanimate things, or pack animals, or de-humanised deaf-dumb.

Ntuli (1984:141), commenting on the lifeless objects mentioned in the poem, arrives at this conclusion:

The series of images presented toward the end of each stanza contrast sharply with the descriptions that precede them of busy human beings. A pillar, a rock, an ant heap are all lifeless objects. Even the mention of a living thing, such as an animal, is followed immediately by its death ... *Ngiyisilwane esifa* ... 'I am an animal which when it dies ...'

The poem shows that workers' human dignity is trampled upon. They are treated as if they did not have feelings, as if they were objects or things. The easy availability of cheap black labour rendered them expendable and easily replaceable. Should a worker want to quit the job because he was dissatisfied, nobody would beg him to stay; many people out there would jump at the opportunity of a job, no matter how unpleasant.

The workers, in fact, are not satisfied with their living and working conditions. Their meagre earnings are insufficient to provide decent shelter, and they stay in houses with leaky grass roofs: *Utshani buyindlu yami* (grass is my home). Vilakazi is not talking of luxury holiday cottages, with thick and carefully kept thatched roofs, but of rudimentary mud dwellings, under a rock krantz or sheltered by a few handfuls of grass. This description is indicative of the places made available to blacks when the homeland system was established. The workers are the providers of the country's wealth,

yet they do not receive a fair share of the profits. This idea is echoed in yet another one of Vilakazi's protest poems, "Woza Nonjinjikazi", where the miner commenting on gold says: *Engilibone licebisa izizwe ... thina bakaMnyama sibuka sikhex'izindebe* (I saw it as it bestows wealth on nations everywhere on earth while we blacks stare at it gaping).

The fourth and final stanza contains the strongest element of protest, as it highlights the alienation of the worker from his employer, and from the whole capitalist system. The main problem is one of utter incomprehension, strikingly described by the image of the deaf-mute, a human being incapable to communicate, ignorant of laws and rights, shunned by society as a semi-animal. Since he is, however, strong and can do manual jobs, he can be used and misused with impunity. This interpretation of *isiduli* as 'deaf-dumb person' rather than as "ant heap" makes more sense in the context of the entire stanza's stress on ignorance of the laws and simplicity of life, which are human characteristics, as are living under a rock krantz, covered by a handful of grass.

Although the oppressed do not understand the laws that govern them, they still feel that they are treated unfairly. Jones and Jones (1996:21) point out that "commitment is concomitant with resistance; for, the reality necessitating commitment is an inhumanism, and there are words galore to describe inhumanism". Vilakazi, responding to this inhumanism, emphasises that these people should be treated with dignity like normal human beings who have feelings and a spirit (Ntuli, 1984:142). Cassiem (1988:9), commenting on the same lines, says: "The black worker, because of his ignorance of the oppressive laws, was fully exploited and treated as a non-human."

The garment worn by poor workers is referred to as *isaka* (sack). It is torn, tattered and old and looks like rags. This concrete image conveys something else. African men were traditionally very proud of their attire, but the de-humanising working conditions on the mines, where they work and die to make the white man rich, have reduced them to people with no identity, no pride, no self-esteem. They do not even shed a tear in front of their masters because this would not change their conditions. Again, Vilakazi mentions the ancestors whom he regards as the only ones concerned about these people. He, as the mouthpiece of the oppressed, resigns himself into the ancestors' hands, whom he knows see everything that is happening.

Kanginalo nonyembezi  
Olucons' enhliziyweni  
Luwel'ezandlen' ezinhle  
Zamadloz' abuka konke

(I don't have even a tear  
To drop from my heart  
Into the loving hands  
Of the ancestors who see everything)

The imagery of tears shows that the poet is pacified when he thinks that even though he cannot do much about the fate of the workers other than challenging those in authority through verse, the ancestors see everything and will intervene on his behalf and solve the workers' plight. Reference to the mediation of ancestors symbolises the protective presence of the beneficial spirits, which inspires a mood for meditation (Jones & Jones, 1996).

#### **4. Relevance**

True literature is born by the writer/poet's immersion into the human reality of society in order to be inspired by its moods of joy or sorrow, by its triumphs or pains. Vilakazi was awakened with a shock by the realisation of the plight of mine workers on the Witwatersrand when he came to Johannesburg from Natal in the 1930s. He had been quite complacent about the black-white relationships in his native province, but then the enormity of black enslavement through a heartless capitalistic system got home to him. He was not a toyi-toying revolutionary, but he made use of his poetry to present to the dominant white class the desperate situation of his countrymen, especially of those employed as pack animals in the death pits of the glowing gold mines. In spite of external appearances of jollification, song and dance in the evening, the workers were deeply suffering from alienation, social injustice, slavery, anonymity, extreme poverty, lack of social support of any kind.

It is evident that in any society there will always be the "haves" and the "have-nots". The aim of any efficient society, however, is to alleviate the plight of the poorer classes by making a sincere effort to safeguard their rights, to be fair and just, and to bring into the work situation an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. This is what Vilakazi suggests, by his depiction of the hopeless situation of the mine workers of his day. In spite of great strides, we

must unfortunately admit that the lofty aims indirectly proposed by the poem are still a long way off.

Vilakazi was an artist who reflected a great deal and was able to express his own and his people's concerns in his work. This poem demonstrates that he was indeed the voice of the people as he concerned himself with those less fortunate, especially the working class of miners. Like a traditional bard, an *imbongi*, he was a spokesperson for the black people of his time. Since he reflected deeply, his expressions became universal. His work is still relevant since any society experiencing what South African blacks endured may find the contribution useful and perhaps apply the same strategies to their problems (Zondi, 1995:145).

## 5. Conclusion

The article has put forward the view that B. W. Vilakazi was deeply concerned with the human suffering of the African race during the colonial era in South Africa. In this poem he shows his shock-awakening to humanity's inhumanity to man in the application of a blind and heartless capitalist system, geared at wealth production at the cost of numberless and indescribable sufferings undergone by poor black miners, who desperately needed work. The workers' suffering was the result of their skin colour, "a problem we did not create" (Biko, 1973:1).

Because a poet is a person who is steeped in his people's culture, he is better able to see present events in the perspective of past history and future developments. This he achieves by means of bold images and selected and deeply evocative words (Canonici, 1993: 10). Vilakazi has succeeded in this poem to demonstrate his social commitment and to address the issue of class. This discussion amply proves that Vilakazi's poetic works should be rightly considered as "classics".

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### **Key concepts:**

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