



The war poems of Mongane Serote: *The Night Keeps Winking* and *A Tough Tale*

D.M. Hlabane
Department of the Secretariat
Vista University
Central Campus
PRETORIA
E mail: HLBNE-DM@homet.vista.ac.za

Abstract

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*For many South Africans who saw themselves as victims of a racist society, the twentieth century was a period of one hundred years of political turmoil and segregation. Representations of racism and the kinds of subjects it created were provided by various writers during specific historical periods. I consider the 1980s as a period in which the political conflict between the repressive white state and those who wanted change was largely undertaken through violence. This article therefore looks at the depiction of violence in Mongane Serote's poems of the 1980s – *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987). As its title suggests, the article analyses these poems as "war poems". It focuses on the political themes Serote develops in the poems. *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) offer horrifying images of war and the senseless bloodletting characteristic of South African life in the 1980s. These poems, as the article will show, reveal how people's lives were damaged by the apartheid state to the extent that many people resorted to violence as a method of liberation.*

1. Introduction

Mongane Serote published *The Night Keeps Winking* in 1982 during his stay in Botswana as a refugee from South Africa, the country of his birth. It comprises poems arranged in three parts, "Time has run out", "The sun was falling" and "Listen, the baby cries and cries and cries". He published *A Tough Tale* in 1987 during the years he spent in London as cultural attaché of the African National Congress (ANC). I regard *The*

Night Keeps Winking (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) as “war poems” because they depict the culture of war in South Africa in the 1980s. In these poems, Serote suggests that the oppressive white power structure is the main cause of violence and political conflict. By retelling the oppressive history of the past he justifies the strategies and tactics of the liberation struggle that had turned equally violent. Against this backdrop, I argue that the impetus of these poems is “the growth of the liberation movement within the country in the 1980s [which] intensified the political struggle” (Beinart, 1992:468).

2. A state of war

William Beinart (1992:482) upholds the view that in the 1980s South Africa was in a state of war. He identifies the government's “discourse of total strategy and the notion of the country being at war” as some of the major sources of violence at the time. In his view, the “total strategy” became a dominant instrument of political repression when the South African president, P.W. Botha, “incorporated the security apparatus more centrally in decision-making” (Beinart, 1992:482). Basing his findings on Alex Boraine's address to *The Journal of Southern African Studies*/Oxford African Studies Conference on Political Violence, Beinart (1992: 482) observes:

The security forces (but not them all) increasingly came to hold a conspiracy theory of politics which negated the idea of legitimate opposition. Over a considerable period of time, they were allowed great freedom and given protection against prosecution for excess. The police in particular, Boraine argued, thus developed a ‘cop-culture’ where internal professional constraints were increasingly eroded.

A state of war in South Africa was also caused by acts of violence encouraged by the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC believed that a repressive state can only be defeated through a war of liberation. Albert Venter (1989:69) has noted that “during the 1984-87 ‘unrest’ the ANC was actively involved in furthering the struggle against apartheid. It sent in guerillas to actively participate in sabotage, bombings, laying of landmines in white rural areas, and assassinations”. In this article, the term “war of liberation” denotes the national liberation struggle led by the ANC. It is “a war of the masses, a war of the people” (Guevara, 1969:50) “provoked initially by the conduct of the authorities” (1969:48).

I find Beinart's observations very useful because they shed light on the socio-political context in which Serote's poems are located. For example, in *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) Serote

depicts the absence of freedom, the negation of “the idea of legitimate opposition” and the resultant state of war. By so doing, he implicitly warns against the futility of a dictatorial or militaristic “theory of politics” that prohibits political dissension. In “Time has run out” from *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) he uses gory images of blood “splashed and scattered on the streets” to paint a picture of the devastation caused by the apartheid state’s vicious war on the oppressed:

we did make distances
whose milestones are droplets of blood
splashed and scattered on the streets
on fences
on walls of houses we live in –
on ceilings
on floors and desks
even on floors of land-rovers
(Serote, 1982:3).

Serote exposes the nature of violence and repression through a terrifying portrayal of bloodshed. In “Time has run out” the bloodletting of the 1980s is indicated by the “droplets of blood/splashed and scattered” everywhere, “on the streets” and “on [the] walls of houses”. The effects of violence are also reflected by the allusion to Steve Biko’s death at the hands of the South African security police. Biko’s death is suggested by the image of blood “on floors of land-rovers”. In *A Tough Tale* (1987) Serote depicts the 1980s as a volatile and precarious time. He captures the political violence that came to be associated with the South African repressive state in words that indict P.W. Botha: “Botha’s voice is heard calling – /tear gas, rubber bullets/Hippos and casspirs” (Serote, 1987:28). Serote (1987:46) writes:

we walk
days filled with peril
I ask now
as our rulers send small boys
to kill our children
to burn our homes
to rape our wives, sisters and daughters
I ask now
while you are so wounded
so bloodied in war
what shall we do on that day?

In this poem, the idea of the ever-looming danger of living in a repressive society is captured by the expression “days filled with peril”. The disturbing air of violence and bloodshed is conveyed by the presence of

“hippos and casspirs” – armoured vehicles. Serote identifies the repressive state as a major participant in the promotion of a war culture. It appears that his political intentions were to turn people against the apartheid state as shown in the way he retells the past and employs it to mobilise the oppressed people.

3. Remembering the past: memory as a weapon

In *The Night Keeps Whining* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) Serote evokes the past as a way of mobilising the oppressed masses. He uses the night and the moon as motifs to recreate the tragic history of the past wars of conquest in “Time has run out” (Serote, 1982:7-8).

The bright eye of the night keeps whispering and whispering
the shadows form and unfold
the night is silent with experience
this night
in these parts of the world
remember
once long ago
it hid the
arrow
it hid the spear
it hid the lethal hand which fought and threw spears
against the night of guns and canons
this night is silent with experience
this night
remember the ship in the 16th century
remember the Portuguese
remember the arrow
the night saw it all.

In this poem the personified night uses its “bright eye”, the moon, to look on the past history of African people whose ancestors “threw spears” to resist white encroachment – “the night of guns and canons”. Serote traces the origins of the violent nature of social relationships in South Africa by recalling the early phases of South Africa’s colonisation. In this way, he suggests that the war culture of the 1980s has to be understood in a particular context and history. Serote explains this historical context in *A Tough Tale* (1987) in “a long story” about the painful past. In this poem he (Serote, 1987:7) interprets South Africa’s past as a history of social divisions and conflict which made it difficult for people to understand each other:

We page through each other’s faces
we read each looking eye.

it has taken lives to be able to do so ...
ah
it is a long story this
that is why we page every face
and read each look ...

The titles of *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) have symbolic effects which can be related to Serote's attempt to reconstruct the past. In the title of *The Night Keeps Winking*, he uses the verb "wink" to personify the "night". The function of the night that is endowed with human qualities of sight, circumspection and vigilance, is to keep a watchful eye on circumstances in Serote's world. In this way, in its personified form, the ubiquitous and omniscient night embodies Serote's memory and recollections of the violent past.

Taken as a whole, the title, *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982), symbolises a tragic tale of the events of the past used by Serote as a unifying factor. He exploits this documentation of the past as a technique of political organisation, politicisation and mass mobilisation. The latter proposition flows from my observation that Serote relates his role as an artist to the material conditions of his immediate social environment. For instance, he remarked in *On the Horizon* (1990):

I was brought up in a community which had chosen to fight against oppression and exploitation: to have taken an opposite position would have been to sell out. I had made a choice to use writing as a means of communication among people, and as a writer who was part and parcel of the struggle, my writing became a weapon (Serote, 1990:111-112).

It is therefore not surprising to hear him in "Once More: The Distance", the first poem in "Listen, the baby cries and cries and cries", from *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) echoing the heart-rending experiences of a people scarred by a history of racism, social deprivation, repression and violence. In this poem Serote uses the suggestion that "today comes from a past yesterday" to unite the African people. He relates the political situation of the 1980s to the political problems of the past. This history, connoted by "the footprints of that past yesterday", Serote associates with cruelty and "the native reserves" where many people starved. He writes in "Once More: The Distance":

you shall remember
– because memory, unlike the eye, knows no sleep –
that today comes from a past yesterday.
the footprints of that past yesterday
like the wind

are everywhere now
on the eye of an innocent child
who shrivelled like burning plastic once
and died –
remember the native reserve?
a gas chamber of stone, sand and dongas
where a day is as cruel as torture
asking
what will you eat
what will you drink
where will you sleep?
(Serote, 1982:25).

The title of *A Tough Tale* (1987) also symbolises the retelling of lived-experiences of Serote's people. These experiences are encapsulated in the word "tale". In Serote's thinking, a "tale" bears testimony to the atrocities and gross human rights violations committed by the white power structure, in the main, against the oppressed people. I choose to qualify the last utterance with the words "in the main" because recent work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggests that both the abusers and the abused were affected by the evils of the past. As I will show below, this view has a bearing on Serote's ambivalent attitude to violence.

The proposition that Serote views his tale or "story" as a record of a painful history of political power struggles is supported by the following words from *A Tough Tale* (1987): "why does one want to tell such a gory tale? so that my friends, our past is not erased" (Serote, 1987:37). Seen in this light, a tale such as Serote's *A Tough Tale* (1987), in Stephen M. Finn's words, becomes a monument of "the past, the historical, the national memory, a major result being the equation of this with the misery and hardship of the present" (Finn, 1988:26). Therefore, it can be argued that *A Tough Tale* (1987) performs a political function similar to the one Bob Leshoai outlines in a discussion of the historical and political role of poetry written by Africans. He states that "one of the functions that poetry serves in traditional African life is to record and preserve, for the future, events of great importance in the nation ... It is a source of education and information to both young and old" (in Chapman, 1982:58).

One of the major political events Serote uses as "a monument" to equate "the misery and hardship" of the past with the state of war in South Africa in the 1980s is the June 16 uprising. For example, in *A Tough Tale* (1987), in a touching and melancholic tone, he urges South Africans to recall those who died during the 1976 uprising – one of the eruptive

moments in the history of resistance in South Africa. By so doing, he reveals the effects of violence and calls for action against the sources of this state of affairs. In the following lines from *A Tough Tale* (1987) Serote highlights the violent nature of South African life by showing how precious lives of innocent children, black and white, whose joy glowed "like headlights of a car in the night", are "sprawled" by "mad" bullets.

once a child sparked our hopes with its eyes,
its gait
this child
once
would leap into the air like a gemsbok
with laughter which rang of joy
a joy glowing like headlights of a car in the
night,
a child, Hector, Katryn Schoon
ours
bones, blood and flesh which promised to seize
the future,
our blood this child
our flesh
our hope
whose curiosity pins our adult life
urging it on
it was a promise that the present can be lived,
and then
the bullet came, the bomb
blind
mad with speed and sound
it sprawled the little bones on the dusty street
it spilled and splashed blood on floors and walls
leaving us cold with disbelief –
(Serote, 1987:17).

Serote extends the memory and exaltation of those who became victims of the country's war culture by adding to the list of martyrs, fallen heroes of the freedom struggle, notably Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Hector Peterson and Solomon Mahlangu – icons of their historical times. He takes this idea further by glorifying working class struggles and the resistance war led by the ANC. For example, at the end of *A Tough Tale* (1982), to use Craig Smith's explanation of the political function of Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Serote reminds us of "the sacrifices made by workers and political activists, of their strength, and especially of their self-taught radicalism" (Smith, 1993:52). Serote writes:

I smile
for every day so many people in the world agree

that our bloody battle is just,
me I smile my friend
for in my country
through struggle, through great pain
through knowledge
the masses defend and built the ANC
the workers defend and built Sactu
the masses, the workers, the students, the
learned
defend and built the ANC, Sactu and the SACP
with many painful days
(Serote, 1987:47-48).

By telling the history of the struggle, the war poems propagate the idea of the necessity of a war of liberation and call for “the mother of all wars” to end “the eight wars we fought/remember Bulhoek/Sharpeville/Soweto/so many times” (Serote, 1982:12). Serote upholds the idea of a “just” war. He uses these poems to reveal the advantages of “our bloody battle” for “equality” (Serote, 1987:47). The impression he creates is that if people’s frustrations and anger caused by political repression are not channelled, it will be difficult to correct criminal and anti-social behaviour, especially in the black communities. What makes his views on violence ambivalent is the fact that while he condones liberation violence, he also exposes the negative effects of violence on individuals and is “made nostalgic for peace” by “comrades pick[ing] up a gun from another who just fell” (Serote, 1987:46).

4. Concerning violence

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon analyses the devastating anger of black people often produced by decades of political oppression and social deprivation. He describes the misdirected self-destructive rage of members of marginalised communities in the following words:

The native’s muscular tension finds outlet regularly in bloodthirsty explosions – in tribal warfare, in feuds between sects and in quarrels between individuals. Where individuals are concerned, a positive negation of common sense is evident. While the settler or the policeman has the right the live-long day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native: for the last resort for the native is to defend his personality vis-a-vis his brother (Fanon, 1967a:42).

Fanon’s theorisation of the impact of the racialisation of human relations on individuals is very relevant to the situation Serote describes in his

poems. Although he seems to exaggerate the psychological problems of the oppressed, the aggression signified by “the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native” is also captured by Serote. In *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) Serote highlights the self-hatred that turns the oppressed people against themselves through various forms of self-destructive violence. In “Time has run out” he identifies alcohol abuse, life-threatening abortions, township violence and the senseless slaying of fellow blacks as examples of this type of violence:

inside this hour
many of us have gone mad
some killed with their bare fingers
some soaked their hearts in alcohol
some tore their wombs with their nails
rather than give birth in oppression
alas
we did amazing things to say simple things
we are human and this is our land
(Serote, 1982:13).

According to Serote this self-hatred and the accompanying self-destructive tendencies indicated by the killing of one’s fellow people at times “with knives” (Serote, 1987:10) emanate from the denigrating humiliation experienced by the majority of black people because of what Fanon (1967b) dubbed “the fact of blackness” in *Black Skin, White Masks*. For instance, Serote says it is the exploited “blacks” who “toil” to enrich those whites for whom the “land/whose multi-colour wealth bloomed”. In “Time has run out”, in the tradition of the Black Consciousness philosophy, Serote (1982:13) uses the expression “it was criminal to be black” to show the stereotypes that are associated with blackness:

this is our land
it bears our blood
it will bear our will
this will
an experience moulded by the inside of this long and dragging hour
where it was criminal to be black
where we toiled and starved
where we were forever drafted to jail or hospital
where we said we were human
where the weight of the day left us sleepless at night

In *A Tough Tale* (1987) Serote views black South African’s life-world as a hostile social environment which aggravates the humiliation of the

blacks. He uses images of coercion and social deprivation to capture "the pain of humiliation":

we were thrown back to the township
to the village
and time, merciless an accomplice
took our life
here we are then
we popped out of life to death
having witnessed the worst
unemployment
jailed and diseased and impoverished
until when the pain of humiliation
like the pain of a raped woman
throbbed and kept pace with our eye-wink
(Serote, 1987:10).

Serote uses the words "we were thrown back to the townships/to the village" to show some of the coercive measures employed by the government to undermine the humanity of black South Africans. These measures include forced removals from areas designated white in the early 1950s – a measure used by the white rulers to cram black people into overcrowded townships like Alexandra and the poverty-stricken homelands of Bophuthatswana, Transkei, Ciskei and Venda. The arbitrary nature of the movement of black people, sanctioned by the Natives Resettlement Act of 1954, from areas like Sophiatown and Newclare to "the so-called black spots" (Chapman, 1989:185) like Meadowlands and Diepkloof, is expressed in words that suggest physical force and brutality: "thrown back", "merciless", "jailed" and "humiliated". Social deprivation is implied in phrases such as "having witnessed the worst unemployment", "diseased and impoverished", and "the pain of humiliation". I think where Mongane Serote depicts "the pain of humiliation" in fierce terms arousing pity and sympathy, leaving the reader agape and paralysed by disbelief in what the human race is capable of, is where he associates the treatment of black people by the apartheid state with the plight of a terrified and helpless woman in the hands of a band of rapists: "until when the pain of humiliation/like the pain of a raped woman/throbbed and kept pace with our eye-wink". The pain of a person who has been raped is intensified by the pairing of the words "raped" and "woman" as if they express a particular human identity.

I draw symbolic connections between a subjugated group of people and "a raped woman" because the latter phrase arouses a feeling that a violated woman loses her personality, self-worth and respect. She belongs, it appears from the harsh register of the phrase, "raped woman", to another sub-human category of woman. She is a woman, but

a lesser form of a woman, a defiled and denigrated woman. Similarly, the fact that black South Africans were “thrown back to the township[s]” and “village[s]” used as labour reserves testifies to the violation of their human rights. In addition to the fact that they had no voting rights, black South Africans were disrespected and deprived of the right to determine the quality of their lives.

It can also be argued that the white minority subjugated the oppressed by relating their lives to the negative connotations of the category “black”. I think there are strong parallels between the discourse of race and the gender-based cultural assumptions of patriarchal societies. The latter societies use the notion of gender to categorise women as inferior objects of desire. This way, women are often abused by men who have been conditioned to think they are superior to women, just as indoctrinated members of the white community “interpellate” (Althusser, 1971:160) blacks as sub-human beings, as “the negation of values” (Fanon, 1967a:32). Thus, the powerlessness of a “raped woman” in male-dominated communities mirror the exploitation of blacks by whites. The horror of the two experiences, rape and racism, can be amplified when we relate it to the sense of being forcefully “mastered” (Yeats, “Leda and the Swan”, line 13), penetrated, and “laid in that white rush” (line 7) conjured by the words subjugated and rape. Like William Butler Yeats’s image of “the broken wall” (line 10) signifying the penetration of Leda by the invading Swan, these two words reverberate with connotations of possessing and taking control of persons by force (see Yeats, 1991:214-215).

Serote uses the effects of violence described above to justify the liberation struggle. He regards a “national revolution” as the oppressed’s logical and positive response to the violence of the South African state. In an ironic and sardonic tone, he dramatises the satisfaction felt by Reagan and Thatcher at having supported South Africa’s acquisition of weapons of war used by the apartheid state to “mow down children, women and men” – “tear gas, rubber bullets, Hippos and casspirs”. In *A Tough Tale* (1987) Reagan “smiles” and Thatcher “grins” when

Botha’s voice is heard calling –
tear gas, rubber bullets, Hippos and casspirs
mow down children, women and men
while Reagan smiles
and Thatcher grins
let them,
the friendship presents they give the Boers
are death makers for us

let them be friends
(Serote, 1987:28).

Serote's unswerving optimism and steadfast belief in the idea of revolutionary violence as a liberatory and self-affirming act are reflected in *A Tough Tale's* documentation of South Africa's state of war. In this poem, he emerges as a poet of revolution who "can no longer be innocent" in the face of brutal repression. The revolutionary nature of his poetry is indicated by *A Tough Tale's* celebration of people's war:

today we are watching a mamba spit and strike,
wink and whistle
and strike
at times blandly
and the old man, laughing, I watching him, says
it must be so
the snake has gone mad
we made him so, we found his hold and struck
him
he knows we want his head now.
Ah
now, I look at the mad mamba with a different
eye
and as I have said
I can no longer be innocent
(Serote, 1987:39-40).

In addition to its subversion of the apartheid state's myth of invincibility, *A Tough Tale* (1987) enacts the oppressed people's response to the "bureaucratic terrorism" (Beinart, 1992:463) let loose by the white republic in the 1980s. The poem undermines the might of the South African repressive state machinery by dramatizing its declining power. *A Tough Tale* (1987) compares P.W. Botha's regime to a besieged snake that "has gone mad" and is now striking about him aimlessly and hopelessly. *A Tough Tale's* "mamba", like the repressive state, has been maddened by the stinging collective blows of the oppressed: "the snake has gone mad/we made him so, we found his hold and struck/him".

Through the image of the white power structure as a poisonous snake confused by the defensive strikes of the oppressed, the poem accomplishes an important political goal. It instills among the oppressed a fortifying feeling that white power, signified by "the mad mamba", is the main source of the state of war in the country. In this way, the minority government of the time is placed in the discomfiting position of the aggressor. The theme of violence can be traced back to "Time has run out" where Serote, using a patriotic tone of combat, urges the oppressed

to respond to the aggressive violence of the oppressor with counter-violence:

Too much blood has been spilled
 Please my countrymen, can someone say a word of wisdom ...
 Ah, we've become familiar with horror
 the heart of our country
 when it makes its pulse
 ticking time
 wounds us
 My countrymen, can someone who understands that it is now too late
 who knows that exploitation and oppression are brains which being
 insane only know violence
 can someone teach us how to mount the wounds and fight
 (Serote, 1982:7).

Perhaps the word "wound" is chosen because, like "a tough tale" and the personified moon which looks on the deeds of humans below, it evokes painful memories of the historical past. The "wound" is a deeply-moving embodiment of the pain inflicted on Serote's people through political detentions, imprisonment, "persistent violence beyond the call of duty by the police" (Beinart, 1992:482), censorship, and other oppressive and repressive measures of the state. The significance of the symbolic "wound" of the poems of Mongane Serote is noted by Alex Levumo in a review of *No Baby Must Weep* (1975): "Serote embodies the past and all it contains in metaphors drawn from the flesh and the senses. The most important of these is that of the 'wound' that expresses all the particularities that history has impressed onto and into the narrator" (in Chapman, 1982:76).

Related to the importance of "the wound" as a reminder of painful human experiences is the verb "mount" with its multiple connotations of resilience and a no-retreat attitude. Taken as a verb signifying an upward movement, "mount" conveys the idea that it is the tormented who must rise and heal their wounds by putting a radical end to the afflictions of political oppression. "Mount" can also be taken as a battle-cry used to mobilise the deprived majority to take up arms and "fight" back. I have derived the notions of a battle and a fight from another meaning of the word "mount", that is, to mount or fix a gun into a firing position.

The latter analysis of the image "to mount the wound and fight" is also relevant to the interpretation of *A Tough Tale's* call for retaliation and a declaration of a war for freedom and self-affirmation. In *A Tough Tale* (1987), having recorded the crimes of the apartheid state machinery, Serote underscores the need to retaliate in words that strongly echo Fanon's idea of the cathartic nature of revolutionary violence. Guided by

an impassioned conviction, born of the hard struggle against tyranny and political subjection, that the "oppressors are as stubborn as the back of a tortoise/ that exploiters are as jumpy and as tricky as a flea" (1987:20), Serote declares in *A Tough Tale* (1987):

Let's tell anyone who hates what we say,
that
our rage is as red as furious flames
our courage
must mount wounds and walk this earth
so it takes
to be able to make children
talk and laugh
cry with them
hold them by the hand
(1987:23).

The view that political oppression is a violent phenomenon giving rise to the counter-violence of the oppressed is at the core of Frantz Fanon's critique of colonialism in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967). Oppression, in Fanon's view, is "violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (1967a:48). His argument that it is the violence of the oppressing nation that breeds the counter-violence of the oppressed nation runs in the following terms:

During the struggle for freedom ... the native's back is to the wall, the knife is at his throat (or, more precisely, the electrode at his genitals) ... After centuries of unreality, after having wallowed in the most outlandish phantoms, at long last the native, gun in hand, stands face to face with the only forces which contend for his life – the forces of colonialism (Fanon, 1967a:45).

The Fanonist conception of the nature of violence was echoed some three years after the publication of *The Wretched of the Earth* by Nelson Mandela who made the following response to the charges of sabotage brought against him and other leaders of the African National Congress in the early 1960s:

I do not, however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the whites (Mandela, 1991:116).

In "Freedom or Death: A Cultural Expression", an essay "prepared initially for the Festival and Conference of South Africa, Amsterdam, 1987" (Serote, 1990:60-64), Serote accounts for the hard-line position he

also adopts in his war poems concerning violence in times of the warring of the “exploiter” (Serote, 1987:47) and the exploited in the following words.

We may as well remind the world that the South African regime is illegitimate; that while we are not surprised that it maintains itself through terrorism, we are not expecting too much when we expect everyone to be outraged. In human terms, this illegitimacy of the white parliament made white South Africans emissaries for the dehumanisation of blacks ... The only condition for blacks to become human was if they could live the slogan ‘Freedom or Death’. This is the condition which characterises the lives of both black and white South Africans of the eighties.

The notion of a war of liberation as a just war should be understood in the historical context of the 1980s, particularly in a time like now when many post-apartheid South Africans prefer dialogue and negotiations. By highlighting the efficacy of the liberation war, Serote’s intention is not necessarily to create an impression that violence is a panacea for all political problems, but to say “the condition which characterise[d] the lives of both black and white South Africans of the eighties” dictated violent forms of political contestation.

5. The war of liberation and the fruits of defiance

In *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) Mongane Serote shows that a war of liberation can actually be waged and won even under a reign of terror. His war poems echo the liberators’ bullets over Pretoria (the symbolic site of apartheid power) at a time when the national liberation struggle was demonised by the apartheid state. Thus, ideologically, they challenge the belief manufactured by the white government through legal, educational, cultural and other “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser, 1971:169) that the armed struggle was immoral and “unchristian”.

It seems plausible that Serote’s worldview has been strongly shaped by the ANC’s philosophical and political orientation. To some degree his poems seek to propagate the ANC’s strategy and the tactics of the national democratic revolution. When Serote wrote *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) the ANC was still of the opinion, in Nelson Mandela’s words, ‘that as a result of government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and thus unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feeling of our people, there would be outbreaks of terrorism which would produce an intensity of bitterness and hostility between the various races

of this country which is not even produced by war" (Mandela, 1991:116-117).

In "The Long Road", the second poem in "Listen, the baby cries and cries and cries", from *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982), Serote glorifies acts of sabotage whose long and resounding explosions come alive in the irregular and lengthened line that carries the war-flames from the kaleidoscopic "red, blue, green and yellow flames scream[ing]" high up "into the silent sky":

today in
orlando
moroka
boysens
soekmekaar
dube
sasol
durban power station
new canada
red, blue, green and yellow flames scream to the silent sky
(Serote, 1982:30).

Serote uses poetry to convince the subjugated that it is better to challenge the repressive power structure and die if needs be for a noble and just cause than to be helplessly exterminated without putting up a fight. The no-retreat spirit of defiance he cultivates in the war poems is best reflected in the following words from "Time has run out":

We must now claim our land, even if we die in the process.
Our history is a culture of resistance.
Ask Mozambique
Angola
Zimbabwe
Namibia
Ask South Africa
Yes –
from Blood River
to Sharpeville to Soweto
we know now
that oppression has at last been unmasked
we ask, why oppress us
to exploit us
why exploit us
now we know –
that the chain must be broken
(1982:6).

In *A Tough Tale* (1987) the need to intensify “the defence for a country” is symbolised by a popular slogan of the 1980s – “Freedom or Death”. This slogan was often heard at political gatherings in the townships and mostly chanted as a war-cry by the youth at funeral ceremonies of victims of state repression. In an echo of the “Freedom or Death” slogan Serote urges the oppressed people to surge forward even under the reign of terror:

soon Botha will yelp
like
Reagan, Thatcher and those others who are an
issue of their
children’s wrath
must yelp
when Pretoria Air Force HQ shatters and sends
screaming flying glass
around
we have arrived
the people are here, something must yield
ah
by watching
and listening
while gagged and muzzled
we have all come to learn and know
that freedom or the grave
(1987:16-17).

In his war poems, *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987), Serote espouses the view that in the face of brutal repressions and racial segregation, it is only “through struggle, through great pain” (Serote, 1987:48), that the marginalised can harvest the fruits of equality – “a firm foundation for progress” (Serote, 1987:48).

6. Conclusion

With *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) Mongane Serote has offered an analysis of racism and its effects on social relations. Through a portrayal of the 1980s state of war in South Africa, he has illustrated the political strife and the disrespect for human lives produced by the use of violence to achieve political objectives. *The Night Keeps Winking* (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) show the pitfalls of totalitarianism and political repression. At an ideological level they contest the opinion that the liberation struggle in South Africa was immoral and therefore responsible for the country’s instability. By stressing what can be achieved by people who are united by a common goal *The Night*

Keeps Winking (1982) and *A Tough Tale* (1987) say that it is possible to change the social environment we live in.

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Serote se gedigte van die tagtigerjare

versetpoësie

vryheidstryd