

# WORLD LITERATURE

## WORDS OF WISDOM

*Edited by*  
Dr S. Chelliah  
Dr Bijender Singh





# **World Literature: Words of Wisdom**

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**Dr S. Chelliah**  
**Dr Bijender Singh**



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9. Theme of Renunciation in Henry James's  
*The Portrait of a Lady* ..... 131  
Dr P. Shanmuga Priya
10. An Analysis of the Paradoxical Love-Hate  
Relationship between a White Woman and a  
Black Man in *The Grass is Singing* ..... 135  
Dr Jyoti Pandey
11. Trauma and Literature: The Enactment of Terrorism  
in Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack* and  
*The Sirens of Baghdad* ..... 143  
Dr V. Ganesan
12. The Impact of Tolstoy's Novels on Literature and  
Society: A Legacy of Reflection and Inspiration ..... 153  
Dr Parveen Bala and Dr Ritu Singh
13. Faith in Humanism and Need for Transcendence  
in Bernard Malamud's Fiction..... 161  
Dr R. Rajesh
14. Mapping the Socio-Cultural Status of Bhutanese  
Women in Kunzang Choden's  
*The Circle of Karma* ..... 169  
Pooja Thulasan and Dr Indrani Singh Rai
15. Njabulo S. Ndebele's "The Prophetess":  
Narratives of South African Culture and Identity..... 179  
Dr G. Priya
16. The Cultural Conflicts in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels ..... 187  
Dr Anand Prakash Dwivedi
17. Negotiating the Idea of Nation: Survival and  
Identity in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* ..... 195  
Dr Arindam Ghosh
18. Anita Desai's Characters: A Paradox of  
Robin Sharma's Doctrines ..... 205  
Dr C. Ramya
19. Kamala Das' Poetry: A Voice of Feminist  
Resistance to Marginalization ..... 211  
Dr K. J. Sibi



# 15

## NJABULO S. NDEBELE'S "THE PROPHETESS": NARRATIVES OF SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE AND IDENTITY

DR G. PRIYA

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Ask me no more  
To know me  
For I'm nothing but a shell of flesh  
Where Africa's revolt congealed  
It's cry pregnant with hope.

– (Sousa, "If You Want to Know Me", 137)

Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele is a poet, novelist and essayist whose works include *Fools and Other Stories*, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, *Bonolo and the Peach Tree*, and *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary*. His latest book is *Fine Lines from the Box: Further Thoughts about our Country*. Njabulo S. Ndebele addresses the themes of superstition, childhood and identity in his short story "The Prophetess". He captures South Africa under the lens of its diverse cultures that tends to embryo the identity of an individual—a little boy in "The Prophetess." The two prime characters juxtaposed against each other are the boy and the prophetess. Home to a tapestry of myths, traditional beliefs, oral literatures and richness of fauna and flora, stories dissecting the cultural patterns and colonial impact on the natives have been written by African writers. "The Prophetess" in fact delineates the growth of the little boy invariably set against the backdrop of his nation. In an Interview with Tara Turkington Njabulo S. Ndebele opines:

If you enter into a language you're entering into another culture, another way of viewing the world. That cannot but make you an open-minded individual, open to new experiences, not threatened by uncertainty because uncertainty itself represents an opportunity for growth. The South African of the future will live comfortably with uncertainty because uncertainty promises opportunity, but you have to be robust about it, you have to be thoughtful about it, you have to contemplate it to get the full richness of it, and I think that is the challenge of being South African: to run away from uni-dimensional and definitive characterisations of ourselves.

Njabulo S. Ndebele begins the story with the exposition of the problem manifested in the little boy. He is timid, innocent and silenced as he is engulfed by the fear of strange dogs. "He was not sure now which he feared more: was it The Prophetess or the dog?" (7). Entrusted with the duty of paramount significance of saving his sick mother, the boy is left with the option to wait patiently to receive the holy water for his mother. Spirituality becomes the recurring theme with different patterns of connections between time and religion. A sense of displacement accentuates the little boy, who fears that the prophetess might curse him. Hermen Kroesbergen says that "African cosmology believes in a spirit world which is well-populated by evil and good spirits. They do not see any solid line of demarcation between the sacred and the secular because the spiritual interpenetrates their daily world. Witchcraft and evil spirits are viewed as causative for the occurrence of some cases of death, barrenness, bad luck and misfortunes" (12). The little boy in the story believes firmly that the prophetess heals every one of their sickness or misfortunes. It is not just an individual belief but the community belief that Ndebele imprints through the incidents of the story.

There was something strangely intriguing about The Prophetess and holy water. All that one was to do, the boy had so many times heard in the streets of the township, was fill a bottle with water and take it to The Prophetess. She would then lay her hands on the bottle and pray. And the water would have curing powers. That's what his mother had said too. (7)

The strangeness of the prophetess is juxtaposed with the stories shared by the people in Charterston township—stories both secretive and fugitive to arouse the feelings of fear and obedience. The boy's mother believes firmly in the prophetess' power, while a



few tend to challenge her healing ability and her medicinal skills. Herman Kroesbergen remarks, "If you want the circumstances of your life to improve—materially, physically or otherwise—then you need deliverance, healing and prophecy, and that is what you may expect from many of those who describe themselves as prophets in Southern Africa today" (18). The whole community suspects that disrespectful and mischievous children will be severely punished by the prophetess and stories of men tied to the vineyard grips the little boy with frightening alacrity.

The conversation of the passengers in the bus evokes the customs and beliefs of South African people, who exist in a world of superstitions and cultural practices that entail the whole nation's identity embroiled in their day-to-day existence. The young man's retroactive statements testify his education and logical reasoning, "The truth is you have no proof. None of you. Have you ever seen anybody caught by this Prophetess? Never. It's all superstition" (8). The little boy equates the prophetess' embrace to the personal warmth and love of his mother. He almost seems to enjoy the smell of camphor, the green dress of the prophetess and the crocheted lace clustered with a cross. Ndebele opens up worlds that can be incoherently magical both to the little boy and the readers. As Friedrich de Wet notes with Brueggemann that "There are two types of prophetic speech: critical language of grief and lament, and positive language of hope and amazement" (156). There is growth in the development of his character—his encounters with the prophetess takes him to a world of wisdom, whereas that with the bunch of boys at the street corner gives him the revelation of blatant truths. "And the teachers were right, thought the boy. Silliness was all those boys knew. And then they could go to school and fail test after test" (15).

The little boy feels superior after his meeting with the prophetess. It urges him to manifest faithful devotion to an unacknowledged ultimate reality, the clash and conflict between illusion and reality is beautifully presented when he senses the power of the prophetess upon him. The child's innocence blooms to match the worldly wisdom of his township. Though he brushes away his desired impulse to converse with the boys, he is propelled by this love for his mother. While Freud believed that religious belief was a form of pathological wish fulfilment, other researchers have proposed that how the human brain works often predisposes people to believe. The human mind looks for patterns, purpose,



and meaning, which may influence why people turn to religion to guide their belief systems. The little boy is attracted to the objects inside the prophetess' home—candle, mask, picture of Jesus, bamboo cross, white crosses on her cape and the white dock on her head erased the countless fascinating stories that were spun around her. His identity sprouted profusely from the timid nature that he was stumping upon in stifling silence. The prophecies, revelations, and morals that had spiritual meaning to members of the township and the street experiences had a positive impact on the little boy. "And he was going to pass on that power to his mother, thus healing her. Those boys were not healing their mothers. They just left their mothers alone at home" (18).

The prophetess is shown as a savior of people's hope throughout the story and in the end no matter the rumors and debates of the people exist, the little boy's fear transfigures into inspiration, the effect of cohesive impressions the prophetess engraves in his mind. In the beginning, the little boy is filled with anxiety, apprehension and distrust and dreadfulness chokes his entry to the prophetess' house. "The boy quickly turned the knob and pushed. The door did not yield. And the dog growled. The boy turned the knob again and pushed. This time the dog made a sharp bark and the boy knocked frantically" (7). The prayer sermons, rituals, meditation, holy symbols trance the little boy, and of course the familiarity she expressed mesmerizes him. "They were warm and the warmth seemed to go through his hair, penetrating deep through his scalp into the very centre of his head. Perhaps, he thought that was the soul of the Prophetess going into him" (14).

"The Prophetess" gives insights into the social and psychological complexities faced by the child in a society that longs to find its autonomy. The childhood innocence is set free and with the conviction that he has the prophetess' power in him reveals the psychological make-up of the child in relation to his socio-cultural milieu. It is a relationship that explains the nature of childhood as a period of a myriad of experiences. Ndebele examines childhood in a black township as an intriguing and captivating period with bittersweet implications. However, the basic revelation lies in the fact that the little boy does not succumb to the forces to become victims; rather, they together with their adults are reborn out of inner willpower. His identity is relevant to the setting and the growth in him compels him to tell a white lie. Roy Baumeister defines identity as, "An identity is a definition, an interpretation,



of the self. People who have problems with identity are generally struggling with the difficult aspects of defining the self, such as the establishing of long-term goals, major affiliations, and basic values" (49). Piaget's cognitive theory advocates, "Individuals with an informational processing orientation deliberately seek out, process, and evaluate identity-relevant information. They are skeptical self-explorers who are open to new ideas and alternatives and are willing to suspend judgment in order to examine and evaluate their self-constructions" (98). The identity formation of the young boy transforms from within exploring and resisting the boundaries set by his African culture.

The non-linear narrative pattern of the story tends to develop the plot and dénouement of the climax. It helps in portraying the inexplicable and mysterious world of the boy where beauty and truth lie within reach but invisible that could not be broken into inconsiderable fragments. The whereabouts of the little boy's father or the father's character does not figure in "The Prophetess." The reference to a visitor called Ma Shange towards the end is an indication that the little boy takes up responsibilities obligingly with positivity and confidence. When the bottle gets broken, the little boy is worried only the holy water. The uncouth words do not have any impact, "Blasted child!" he shouted, "Shouldn't I look you? Just running on the street as if you owned it. Shit of a child, you don't ever pay tax. Fuck off home before I do more damage on you!" (22).

Exhausted by the journey to the prophetess' house, the little boy is shocked and shattered. Unable to view the future as he had desired it to be, he becomes depressed and forlorn. "But it was not long, before he felt a jab of pain at the centre of his chest and felt his heart beating fast. And he became aware of the stabbing sensation of terror as he thought of the broken bottle and the spilt holy water and his mother waiting for him and the water that would help to care her" (22). To prove his love for his mother and stamp his identity as a liberated and powerful individual from childhood to a matured young chap, he decides to fetch the tap water again in one of the bottles in Rex's kennel. The little boy experiences a tremendous urge to exercise the power he never had—the power of decision making, the power of judgment, act and bestow as he wishes. He swings into action when he senses that his growth and identity is thwarted by the untoward incidents that deprive him of the blessed holy water received from the prophetess. "He



watched the candle flame dancing before him and felt the warmth of the stove. What had the Prophetess seen in him? He wondered. Did she still feel him? Did she know what he had just done?" (23). A plethora of questions and scary thoughts haunt the boy's mind, but the internal conflict is conquered by his determination to save his mother. He takes the burden of guilt, the weight of wrongdoing, and the burden of mistrust.

Ndebele portrays a little boy longing for the personal touch, wherein he is pushed to grow as an adult to shoulder his family. His sick mother waits for the healing touch and the boy's emancipation from his mist of pain and chaos is silhouetted against the cultural beliefs. Home, family, identity and culture hold the little boy together establishing secure bonds of connectivity between him and his mother. The power of the prophetess to heal and to foretell the future by invoking the spirits of the ancestors instill fear and respect in the boy when he fetches the tap water for his mother. The prophetess represents the authority of tradition and culture. Her description of the boy's mother as having 'a heart of gold' helps the boy to come out of the muteness he was dwelling for long. She plays the role of a mother when she speaks to the boy about the need for him to love his mother. The words unconsciously contribute to the shaping of the boy's view about the women in his life, not just his mother. For instance, when the prophetess stresses the importance of obedience to his mother, she leaves an indelible mark of utmost significance as a mentor and a mother.

"You are very fortunate indeed to have such a parent. Remember, when she says, "my boy, take this message to that house", go, when she says: "my boy, let me send you to the shop", go and when she says, "my boy, pick up a book and read", pick up the book and read. In all this, she is actually saying to you, learn and serve. These two things little man, are the greatest inheritance." (19)

The boy learns what is expected of him is acceptance and compassion not just his mother but also toward the women in society. The embrace of the prophetess soothes his troubled heart, cleanses his feelings of guilt and empowers him to a state of courage and convictions. Having felt the tender care of the prophetess and the loving tone in her voice, the boy appreciates her by respecting her—the fear changes into adoration. When he realizes that he heals his mother with ordinary tap water, the joy

that fills his heart cannot be contained. "He had carried his burden. And the boy smiled, thinking it had worked" (23). The boundary between the natural and supernatural is permeable when the little boy restores the health of his mother and he believes that she is on her road to recovery. Religion and prophecy becomes a source of comfort and guidance to the boy. The human need to belong, combined with the desire for social connection, also contributes to the little boy's desire to be part of someone larger than the self. Three types of identities emerge in diverse variants in the little boy-personal identity that stems from his attributes such as "personal values" and "self-knowledge;" social identity constructed from "reputation" and "impressions made on others" and collective identity developed from elements such as "religion" and "family."

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# WORLD LITERATURE

## WORDS OF WISDOM

The anthology *World Literature: Words of Wisdom* is a compilation of 58 well-written research papers based on various writers from various countries across the globe. World Literature can be called a treasure trove of cultural, religious, historical, and artistic expressions that have shaped our understanding of the human experience. This anthology compiling various literary gems around the world is not only a testament to the richness and assortment of human expressions but also a significant contribution to the literary canon. It provides a window into the lives, experiences, and traditions of people from diverse regions, religions, and cultures. It illuminates the commonalities of communities. This anthology also offers a unique opportunity to shed light on some noted works of some select international writers across time and space. It allows readers to observe how literary movements, themes, and motifs have been adapted and transformed as they move from one culture to another. It also highlights the connections and influences that exist between seemingly disparate literary traditions, and encourages readers to engage in comparative literary analysis. Apart from it, the present anthology also provides a comprehensive and pervasive overview of the literary works that have shaped human history, and enables readers to evaluate these texts in their cultural and historical contexts. It also serves as a gateway to further exploration of specific literary traditions and genres, and inspires critical inquiry and reflection. This anthology is a significant contribution to the literary canon, as it brings together the greatest works from around the world and offers a panoramic view of human expressions and experiences.



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