Can Themba: The Making and Breaking of the Intellectual Tsotshi, a Biography

by

Siphiwo Mahala

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**Synopsis**

Mahala's biography gives insight into the life and writing of Can Themba (1924–1967), an iconic figure of the South African literary world and Drum journalist who died in exile. This rich and absorbing biography of Can Themba, iconic Drum-era journalist and writer, is the definitive history of a larger-than-life man who died too young. Siphiwo Mahala's intensive and often fresh research features unprecedented archival access and interviews with Themba's surviving colleagues and family. Mahala’s biography takes a critical historical approach to Themba’s life and writing, giving a picture of the whole man, from his early beginnings in Marabastad to his sombre end in exile in Swaziland. The better-known elements of his life – his political views, passion for teaching and mentoring, family life and his drinking – are woven together with an examination of his literary influences and the impact of his own writing (especially his famous short story 'The Suit') on modern African writers in turn. Mahala, a master storyteller, deftly follows the threads of Themba’s dynamic life, showcasing his intellectual acumen, scholarly aptitude and wit, along with his flaws, contradictions and heartbreaks, against a backdrop of the sparkle and pathos of Sophiatown of the 1950s. Can Themba’s successes and failures as well as his triumphs and tribulations reverberate on the pages of this long-awaited biography. The result is an authoritative and entertaining account of an often misunderstood figure in South Africa’s literary canon.

**Sort review**

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About the Author
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Can Themba read widely, including Drum's competitors such as The Star. (Photograph by Jürgen Schadeberg.)

In this 1948 University of Fort Hare picture, Can Themba (3rd row from bottom, 11th from left) is seen alongside his Beda Hall housemates, including Alfred Hutchinson (top row, 4th from right), Godfrey Pitje (3rd row, 8th from left), Ntsu Mokhehle (2nd row, 1st on right) Lionel Ngakane (1st row, 3rd from left), and Nthato Motlana (3rd row, 2nd to the right of Themba). (Private collection, Daniel Massey; photographer unknown.)

Can Themba (left) receiving the first prize from Henry Nxumalo for the inaugural Drum short story competition. (Photograph by Jürgen Schadeberg.)

Can Themba with his right-hand man, Casey Motsisi, celebrating the first anniversary of Africa! magazine, where they served as editor and assistant editor, respectively. (From Jürgen Schadeberg, ed., The Fifties People of South Africa; Bailey's African Photo Archives, 1987; photographer unknown.)

Can Themba as a 28-year-old teacher in his room in Sophiatown, before he started working as a journalist. (Photograph by Jürgen Schadeberg.)

Can, the family man, seen here with his wife, Anne, and their eldest daughter, Morongwa. (Private collection, Themba family; photographer unknown.)

Elizabeth Maizzie Maphisa was a nurse with whom Can Themba had a son. (Private collection, Linda Maphisa; photographer unknown.)

Juby Mayet was one of Can Themba's protégés in the newsroom. (Photograph by Jürgen Schadeberg.)

Can Themba wrote extensively about Dolly Rathebe and ‘her men’ and, according to Drum magazine, he was one of...

Some of the interviewees, including Mbulelo Mzamane, Nadine Gordimer, Anne Themba, Ahmed Kathrada, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Jürgen Schadeberg, Juby Mayet, Parks Mangena, Lindiwe Mabuza and Malcolm Hart, have since passed on. In addition to these formal interviews, I had casual musings with a number of people who shared insights and perspectives on Can Themba and his generation. Among others, I can make mention of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the late Lewis Nkosi, whose formidable insights were most edifying.

I thank my editor, Helen Moffett, who once again demonstrated the utmost patience, mental dexterity and erudition as we walked the precarious journey towards delivering our fourth baby together. I unreservedly acknowledge legendary writer-turned-filmmaker Mtutuzeli Matshoba, who assisted with the recording of my conversations with some of the people who knew Themba. Matshoba brought on board a distinguished film crew, including Wiseman Mabusela, Lawrence Lerato Lichaba, Mpho Ramathuthu, Michael Moagi Matsie and Paul Zisiwe. Special thanks to my research assistant, Uviwe Mshumpela, who has been my reliable companion on this journey. This book would not have been possible without the support of Can Themba's daughters, Morongwa and Yvonne Themba, who graciously gave me access to family documents. They also granted me permission to peruse their father's student records at the University of Fort Hare. I would like to extend a special word of gratitude to the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature for their assistance during the research stage of this project. I thank my family for their unyielding support and patience while I was pursuing this project. I could not be the husband that I wanted to be to my wife, Miliswa, nor was I able to be the father that I ought to have been to our three daughters, Mihlali, Qhama and Kuhle; they nevertheless remained supportive of my endeavours throughout this period.

Lastly, I am grateful for the phenomenal life of Can Themba. Although he died more than fifty years ago, he continues to inspire writers and readers with the timelessness of his works. This book will hopefully make a significant contribution to the long journey towards rediscovering and immortalising Can Themba.

Introduction

He [Can Themba] lent to his thoughts the same vivid imagery, sharp staccato rhythm of the township language of the urban tsotsi, because he himself was the supreme intellectual tsotsi of them all.

Lewis Nkosi — Writing Home (2016), 208

Lewis Nkosi's words have become so familiar to readers and scholars of Can Themba that we have forgotten how startling they are, given that tsotsis were (and are) feared criminals, while Themba was the quintessential black urban intellectual of his times. But they plunge us into the heart of the myth of who Themba really was, reflecting his status as a writer who straddled fault lines, epitomised paradoxes, and about whom both too much and too little is known (or assumed).

One of these paradoxes is that when Themba died in 1967, at the tender age of 43, he did not have a book to his name — and yet he remains one of the most influential minds in the history of literature and journalism in South Africa. More than half a century later, his name is still part of public discourse and creative flow. This bears testament to the resilience of...
his voice, which continues to reverberate from beyond the grave. Themba’s short story ‘The Suit’ remains his most famous work and arguably the most successful short story by a South African writer. First published in the inaugural issue of Nat Nakasa’s literary journal The Classic in 1963, it remains the pinnacle of his creative output. Aggrey Klaaste rightfully describes ‘The Suit’ as a story that has ‘all the elements of a classic’. Over a period of nearly six decades, it has been translated, republished and adapted numerous times into different genres, ranging from graphics to theatre and film. The overwhelming success of ‘The Suit’ has unfortunately overshadowed many of Themba’s other works, some of which have equally great potential. The critical work published on Themba thus far mostly covers his journalistic and literary productions. Where his biographical background surfaces, it is primarily with regard to the period when he worked for Drum magazine, and very little about his life pre- and post-Drum has been documented. David Rabkin argues that a lot more has been written about Themba than he had himself written. Yet, the converse is also true: Themba wrote a great deal, but because of the difficulties of collating his work (see Chapter 16), some of it has received little critical attention. This leaves a significant void in our critical evaluation and understanding of his works, as well as what made him and what broke him in the end. Despite the fact that Themba features in almost every historic study pertaining to Drum magazine and Sophiatown, and that his peers have written extensively about him, there is no study that comprehensively explores his human experience. This book endeavours to consolidate the dispersed fragments necessary in re-remembering the vital elements in reconstructing Themba’s life and literary legacy. Themba was as fun and exciting in person as he was as a writer. His intellectual acumen, artistic flair, scholarly aptitude, expansive sense of irony, and abundant wit and humour are some of his characteristics most distinctly remembered by those who interacted with him either in person or through his works. Ursula A. Barnett, literary critic, described Themba as ‘the most interesting personality and perhaps the most talented of the writers of the late fifties and early sixties’. Nkosi was probably the most distinguished chronicler (and also the fiercest critic) of the 1950s’ Drum generation of writers, and also a ‘remarkable judge of character’, according to former Drum journalist Doc Bikitsha. It was Nkosi’s belief that Themba had the ‘liveliest mind and the best command of the English language’ of his generation. Bikitsha agreed: ‘Can’s beauty and talent lay in his prowess of thought, writing and debate.’ It is no wonder his writings have outlived him and many of his contemporaries, garnering wide readership and filling theatres more than five decades after his passing. His works continue to inspire different generations of readers and writers alike. Themba’s intellectual disposition has been widely recognised and celebrated by his contemporaries and successive generations in journalistic, literary and academic spaces. But he was no ivory-tower academic; trained as a teacher and plying his trade as a journalist, he staged his debates and discussions in the shebeens of Johannesburg and in his abode, the aptly named ‘House of Truth’. Mcebisi Ndletyana’s adaption of Antonio Gramsci is useful in expanding on what is meant by describing Themba as a public intellectual: ‘Intellectuals are individuals who, by virtue of their position in society and intellectual training, are preoccupied with abstract
ideas, not only for self-gratification, but also to fulfil a public role. As an 'intellectual tsotsi', Themba’s intellectual disposition defied orthodoxies and often allied him to those resented, rendered invisible and excluded in society (see Chapter 12). In juxtaposing Themba’s intellectual acumen with the cult of a tsotsi, Nkosi alluded to his former colleague’s social and historical location. A tsotsi can be described as a slick township thug or criminal who terrorises communities through violent attacks, assault and robbery; a robust subculture, they are often distinguishable through their attire and patois. Father Trevor Huddleston, in his memoir of his years in Sophiatown, Naught for Your Comfort, notes that ‘the tsotsi is the supreme symbol of a society which does not care. His knife and his revolver are significant not only for today but for tomorrow.’ Huddleston’s claim that tsotsis were part of the societies they tormented was shared by Themba’s contemporary and fellow journalist Henry Nxumalo, who argued that tsotsis were not an exotic tribe situated outside society, but a product of the socio-economic conditions of black people in South African townships of the time: Of course, tsotsis are made as well as born: they are made every day on the Reef, it is true that when a young boy takes a wrong turning it is partly his own fault; but the amount of crime in a city varies with the well-being or poverty of the mass of its citizens. With the grinding poverty and the sea of squalor that surrounds the ‘Golden City’, it is not difficult to understand the rest. There is a struggle for existence, and the individual intends to survive. While Nxumalo, Arthur Maimane, Bloke Modisane and other scribes from the 1950s’ generation wrote about the tsotsi phenomenon, according to Muxe Nkondo in an exclusive interview in 2015, Themba stands out for ‘humanising’, perhaps even romanticising, the tsotsi in his writings. Many of his stories, both fiction and non-fiction, feature the tsotsi character, whether referred to as a thug, an urchin or a gangster. As a writer who chronicled and interrogated the stories of the black urban world, Themba was able to locate the tsotsi and the intellectual in the same social and cultural space. Themba might not have been a knife-wielding or gun-toting criminal, but he immersed himself in the lives of tsotsis: he spoke their language, dressed like a tsotsi and drank with them in shebeens. They have an almost permanent presence in his writing, and the relationship flowed both ways: poetry became one of their meeting points, as the Sophiatown tsotsis had a penchant for Shakespeare’s sonnets (which they would force the local intellectuals to recite). Themba, in particular, used to write poetry for some of the gangsters, which they intended to use to impress girls. In the film Come Back, Africa, in which he had no script to follow but had to improvise a debate with friends, Themba appears sympathetic to Marumu, the tsotsi character, and explains how the trauma of losing his father at an early age, and the poverty that led him to desiring small things like sweets, might be the cause of his aggression: ‘He wanted bigger things, he wanted to grab things that were bigger and the only way you could get those things was through force, and so he thought in terms of force …’ Themba and his peers often suffered the same fate as the tsotsis – arrest and imprisonment, even if for different reasons. It was because of their proximity to the tsotsi, their intertwined lives, that Themba claimed that the tsotsis ‘saw us as cousins’. It was because of this connection that Nkosi saw Themba as the embodiment of the ‘intellectual’ and ‘tsotsi’.
Paul Gready expands on the ways that Themba embraced the tsotsis to the extent of romanticising their ways, even seeing his own condition mirrored in theirs: ‘Themba tried to ally himself with a private conception of the tsotsi, and thereby to the people. He was the supreme “intellectual tsotsi”, who eventually romantically compared the violence of the gangs to that of the possessed, self-destructive artist, that is, himself. Onto the romantic myth of the gangster Themba super-imposed his own myth of the artist.’

Gready’s words remind us that Themba was in many ways a troubled genius. In addition to the challenges of being a black professional operating within the confines of the apartheid state, Themba was frustrated by the system that did not recognise his hard-earned qualifications, had no appreciation for his experience, and certainly paid no regard to his intellectual contribution, talent and accomplishments. His reliance on alcohol to cope with his personal troubles is well documented.

In the end, he was overwhelmed by a combination of forces that left him in despair. Driven out of his home country, he lived a destructive life in exile, leading to his untimely demise in 1967, thus depriving the literary world of the opportunity to benefit further from his potential. Themba’s protégé and veteran journalist Harry Mashabela put it succinctly in his tribute to the fallen scribe when he said: ‘Can Themba was what he was and not what he could have been because his country is what it is.’

Hence Nkosi’s lament in his tribute to Themba: ‘We mourn what might have been.’ At the time of his passing, Themba’s works were banned in South Africa under the Suppression of Communism Amendment Act of 1965. In yet another paradox, his passing sparked interest and breathed new life into his oeuvre, thus entrenching his name in the annals of journalism and the literary landscape in South Africa. While his works are widely celebrated today, reference to his biographical background is scant. Where reference is made to biographical details, there are barely any substantive facts that give an epistemological account.

Another trend that has perhaps skewed our ability to gauge Themba’s life and works clearly is the established pattern in scholarship of discussing Themba as part of a discursive analysis of a generation. Perhaps the most intensive of the texts in grappling with Themba as a person is Nkosi’s tribute, in which he pays homage to two of his contemporaries – Can Themba and Nat Nakasa. Many scholars, however, focus on Themba’s works without making any direct links to his life experiences, and reference to his personal traits are made only glibly. This is true not only of scholarly discussion of Themba, in particular, but of the entire generation of ‘Drum Boys’, who are often treated as a homogeneous group. This is reflected in Lucky Mathebe’s claim that ‘during most of the time when the history of the Drum school is written and discussed, the writers are singularly treated as an inferior type of elite’.

In many ways, Themba has become the primary victim of the wholesale packaging of this generation of writers. He is projected as a representative of a generation: the reflection of the much-romanticised African urban world, the epitome of black writing in the 1950s and 1960s in all its glory and defects.

Themba joined Drum magazine at the point of its transformation in 1953, and became a formidable force in its renewal at a time when it was reinventing itself as a publication for urban Africans – a far cry from the initial African Drum, which presented a ‘return to the tribe’ mantra.
There is no doubt that Drum magazine played a pivotal role in chronicling the emergent black urban world of the 1950s and providing a publishing platform for authentic black voices, thus speaking directly to black audiences about their own life experiences and perspectives. However, the treatment of these writers as a collective comes at the expense of their individual qualities, and carries the risk of distorting their distinct characters, capabilities and experiences. This is an important point of departure for this book: I try to go beyond the usual focus on the pinnacle of Themba's journalistic and writing careers and pay particular attention to his educational and intellectual journey prior to joining Drum magazine, as well as the post-Drum years of deterioration and eventual demise. In its most prosaic sense, then, this book endeavours to answer the basic question, 'Who was Can Themba?' Answering this central question means investigating Themba's biodata and linking this both to what he wrote, and what has been written about him and his work. In grappling with this question, particular attention has to be paid to the making and the breaking of Themba; how he immortalised himself in his writing, while at the same time needing to be recreated through various projects of recovering his work over the years. This approach compels us to go beyond the stereotype of the venerated writer and journalist, to try to trace how he became the iconoclastic figure that we know today, and the factors that contributed to this. The decision to select Can Themba as the subject of this biographical text is obviously premised on recognition and appreciation of his work, and is therefore subjective. I have had to consciously suppress the temptation to write a hagiography instead of objectively engaging with biographical elements. My juxtaposition of the construction and destruction of Themba acknowledges that an honest account of his life history entails both positive and negative elements. Yet, I have tried to both explore and evade the binaries of the apparent contradictions and paradoxes of his life. In writing this biographical text, I have tried to cast the net wide to include aspects that either have not received adequate attention or have been overlooked in the past. In any attempt to trace Themba's literary and journalistic trail, it soon becomes evident that his trajectory is complex and multifaceted, branching through the history of his education, romantic and domestic life, politics and professional experiences. A biography is often understood as a text that mirrors the life and times of specific individuals and their societies. Yet, a mirror is a passive object that only reflects what is put in front of it. My interest goes beyond documenting or mirroring a series of dates and facts. My intention is to wrestle with the experiences and the emotions behind the facts, to come as close as possible to representing Themba in human form, while at the same time juxtaposing his life with his works. This compels us to trace the contours of Themba's trail, taking stock of each and every mound and mountain on which he left his footprint. This book, therefore, goes beyond the biographical. It is an attempt to present an integrated construct that draws parallels between the life and times of Themba and his entire body of work. One constant challenge in writing the life history of someone long after their death is that there are often hidden stories, contradictory facts, subjective memories and contending narratives about such individuals. In addition to this, there are the dangers of anachronism, in which the biographer situates the story in a discordant
historical context. To avoid this in researching the life of this enigmatic personality, I had to 'generate' primary material as well as consult texts, scholarly resources, archival material and oral narratives. A substantial amount of the information included in this book comes from more than twenty exclusive interviews I conducted with people who knew and interacted with Themba personally, or were touched by his work. These oral sources have provided elements and information not previously featured in any other research on Themba. The fact that so many of those who kindly shared their memories and reflections with me have passed away since I began the interviews in 2013 is an indication of how fragile our past is, and how important it is to uncover its truths before they are lost to us.

The telling of the truth in all its glory and defects was central to Themba's being. As a teacher, journalist, short story writer and philosopher, he was a man in search of truth. Naming his modest dwelling the House of Truth was a declaration of the ideals he cherished. The House of Truth may once have been a physical place (long since crushed by apartheid bulldozers), but it lives on today as a metaphor for Themba's dynamic but incomplete life project. It represents the vibrancy of the debate and intellectual engagement in which he so fervently believed. It represents the reading and writing culture that was his forte. It also symbolises the dreams he cherished and pursued, but could never realise in his lifetime. Most importantly, it represents who Themba was and what he stood for. The re-emergence of the House of Truth in various forms, including in the shape of a play, is a clear demonstration of the resilience of his intellectual legacy. To understand Can Themba, to understand the forces that made him and broke him, we need to get inside the House of Truth where his life unfolded. Let us open the door and step right in.

PART I

Death and Birth of a Scribe

A Knock on the Door

We were those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilisation (at the highest levels that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff 'No' or a 'Yes' so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once. Can Themba — Requiem for Sophiatown (2006), 57

He knocked on the door. There was no response. He knocked again, and listened. All was quiet. He tried to turn the doorknob and push the door open. It was locked from the inside. He knocked once more, harder this time. Nothing. He pressed his ear against the wooden door. Silence.

With one eye closed, he peeped through the keyhole. He could make out a lanky man lying in bed with his feet pointing heavenwards. It was definitely the man he was looking for. Why on earth was he not opening? He banged on the door with his fist, shouting his name: 'Bra Can! Bra Can Themba!' No response. He hammered on the door. Silence.

It was Friday, 8 September 1967. The 25-year-old Pitika Ntuli had travelled all the way from Lubombo, a journey of about 25 kilometres, to Manzini in Swaziland (now the Kingdom of eSwatini), where his mentor rented a flat. At the time Can Themba – full name Daniel Canodoce Themba, also known as Dorsay – was a teacher at St Joseph's Catholic Mission School in Umzimpofu, about five kilometres outside Manzini. He often hosted young men in search of knowledge and intellectual stimulation. Now Ntuli's friend, Bicca Maseko, suggested that they go watch a film at the bioskop (cinema) and come back later. It was a Friday afternoon, and the schools had closed for the September holidays. Teacher Can Themba had probably drunk a little too much, a
little too early, and had passed out, Maseko reasoned. With little choice, Ntuli concurred, and left reluctantly. He kept looking over his shoulder as they walked away, hoping that the door would fly open.

Ntuli, a young South African student exiled in Swaziland, was intending to visit the man who had been his role model and mentor since higher primary school days. Growing up in Witbank (now eMalahleni) in the former Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga Province), Ntuli often visited Sophiatown, a culturally and politically vibrant township in Johannesburg, during holidays and over some weekends. Here he came to know of one Can Themba, a former teacher who had become famous as a journalist plying his trade with Drum magazine. Despite his fame, Themba remained humble and opened his door to everyone. He had turned his abode in Sophiatown, which he named the House of Truth, into a place for candid debate and intellectual engagement.